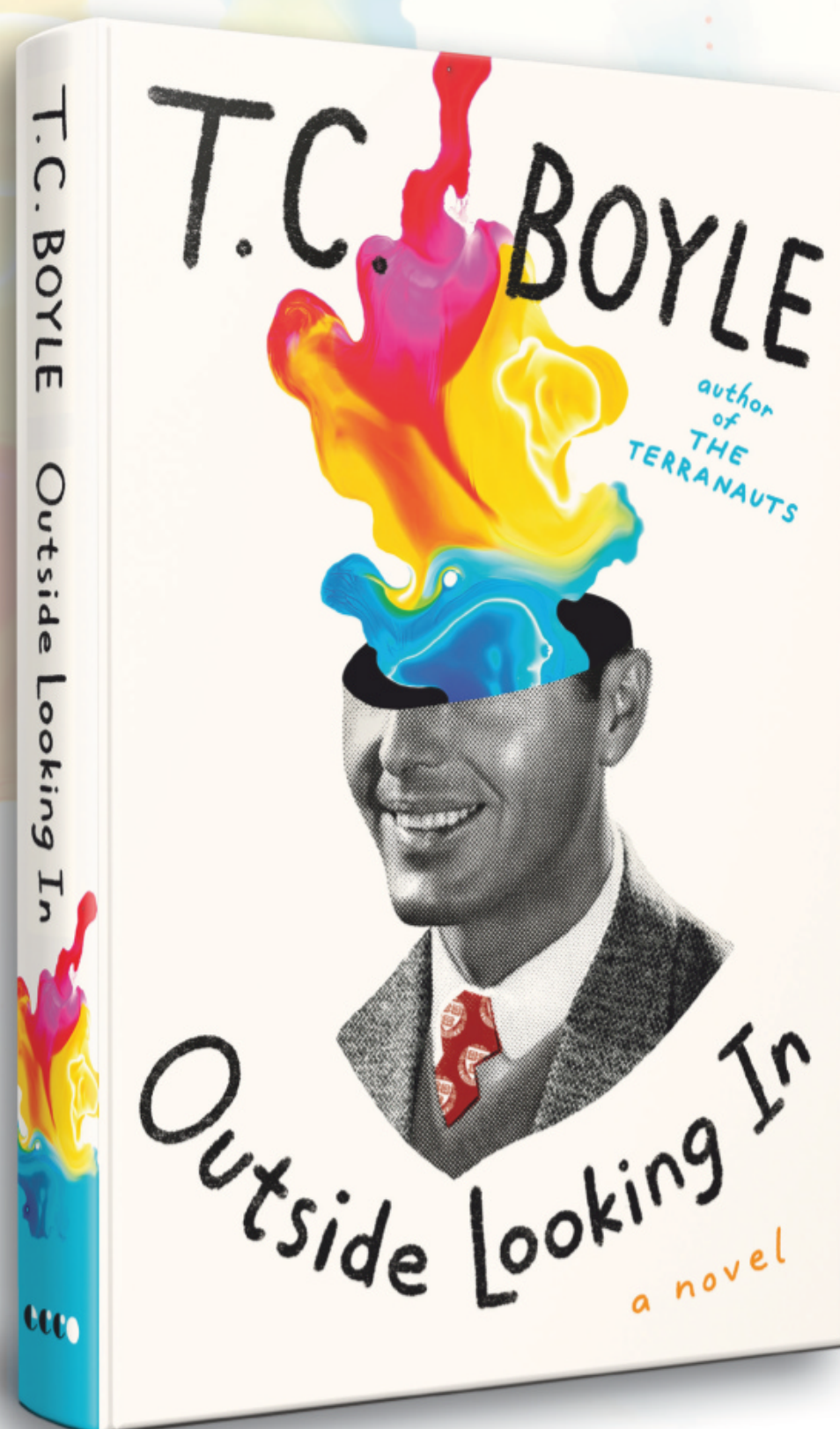


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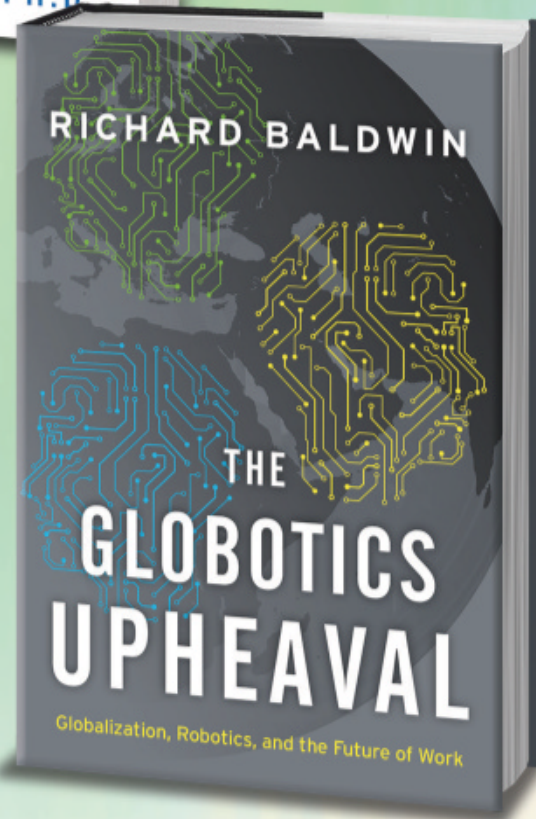
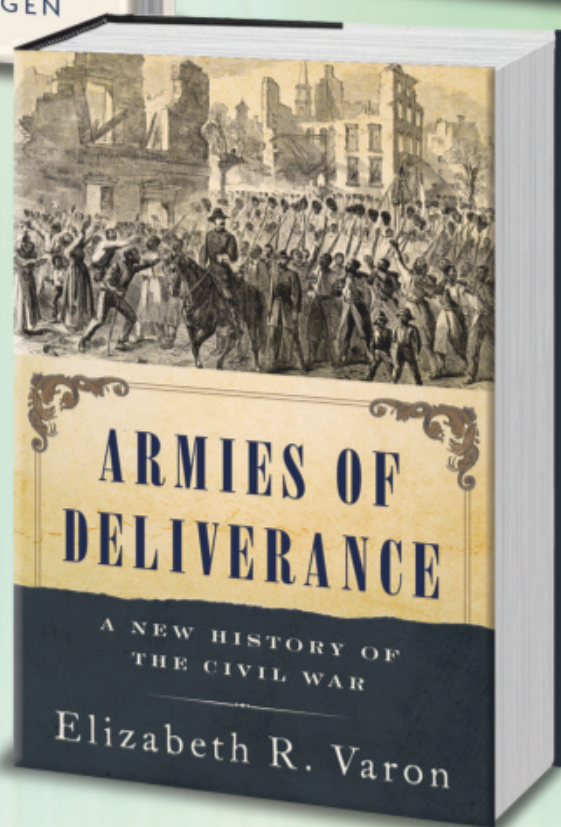
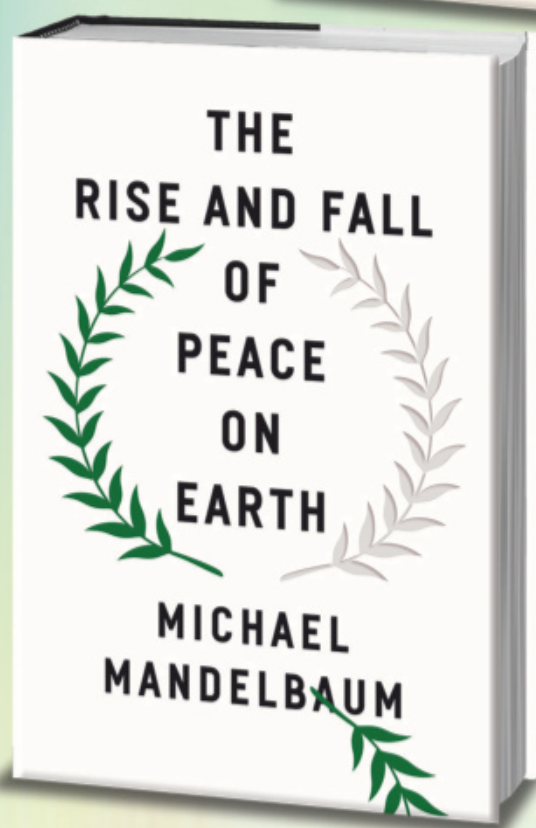
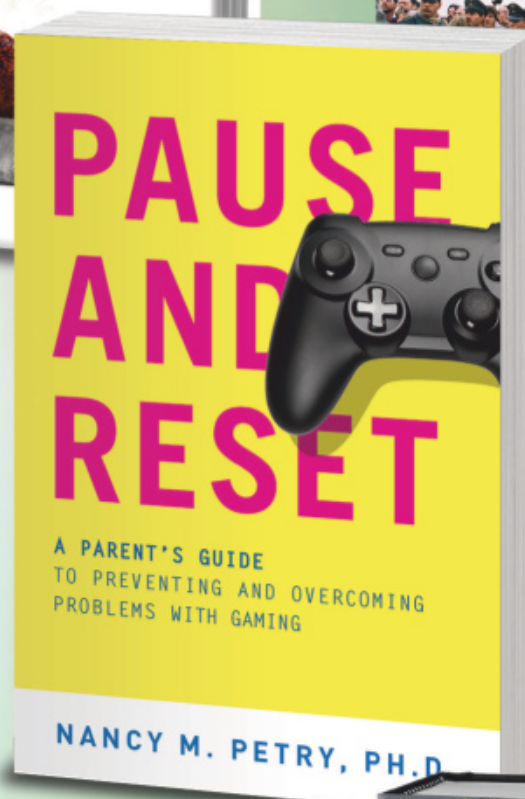
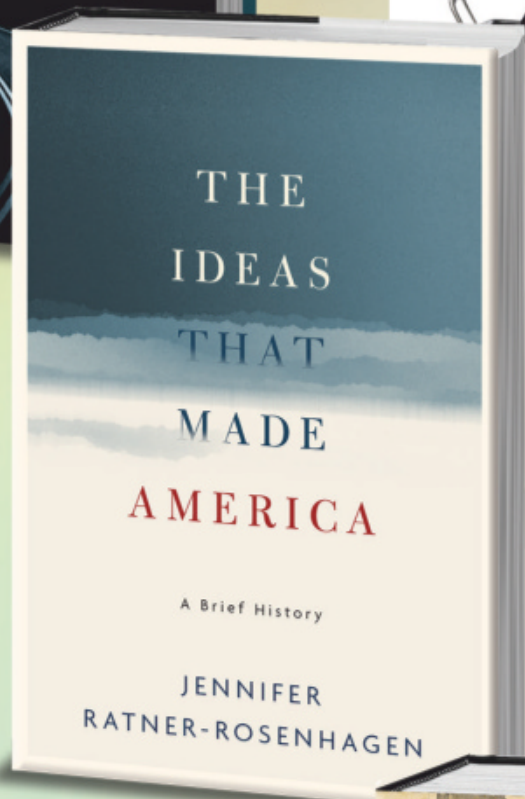
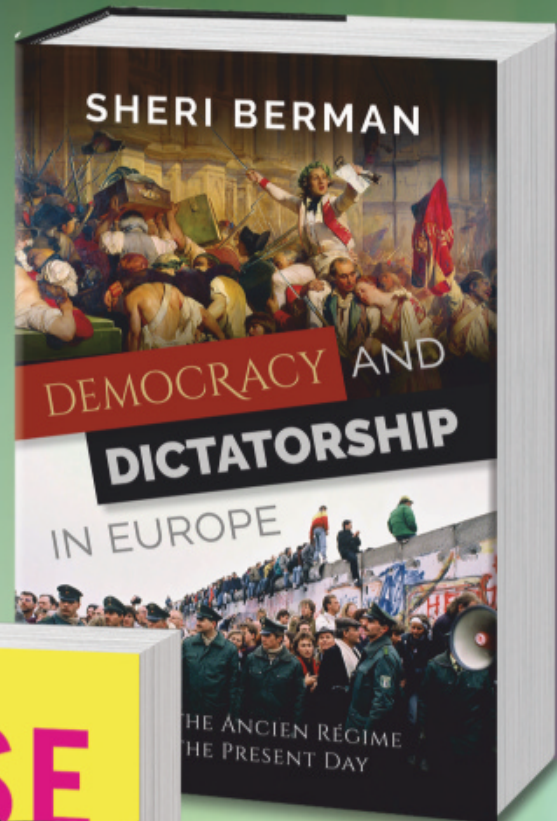
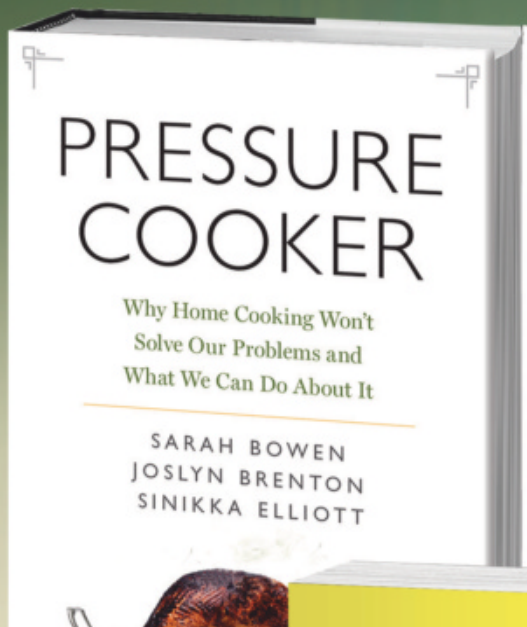


GARRY WILLS ON THOMAS MERTON



New Ideas Bloom

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LETTERS

Crimes and Misdemeanors

I agree with Lionel Shriver's assertion that the complete cultural banishment to which perceived sexual offenders are sometimes subjected is harsh, and mindlessly so ["Cruel and Unusual Punishment," *Easy Chair*, February]. The idea that we must scour our libraries, museums, cable feeds, and movie houses for the output of anyone morally imperfect is absurd on its face. An artist's work attains a life of its own, firmly apart from its creator: it moves beyond his or her private identity to touch something universal in us. This is precisely why it has value. To dismiss this output because of flawed behavior and human frailty is cultural suicide.

Shriver rightly points out that it is all the more vital to preserve what's positive in the artist's oeuvre, especially in the face of a negative revelation. Who among us, after all,

would consent to be judged solely on the basis of the worst thing we have ever done? Perhaps a subsequent generation, inoculated against the wildfire of social media, will see fit to resist this trend.

Joanne G. Murphy
Chicago

Times of major societal change can be difficult to live through—public values shift quickly and there can be a lag in more tempered responses. I appreciate that Shriver's fears and concerns may be justified at this time, but I also live with the memory of the Fifties and Sixties, when a woman's association with sexual behavior was likely to result in social, economic, and reputational damages. The promise of the #MeToo movement is a better world for all of us, even if the cost for now is fear and a period of chaotic reactions.

Alice Kidd
Lillooet, British Columbia

The conclusion to Shriver's line of reasoning is that since a rape takes only a short matter of time, and ongoing abuse often just a few months

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or years, penalties for the perpetrators of these acts should be capped proportionally. Furthermore, consumers should forever have access to these artists' works, and the artists access to the funds generated from that work.

As a clinical psychologist, I know from experience that the lives of those who have been sexually assaulted and abused are impacted forever. This is supported by years of published research. Shriver fails to make the case for why the consequences of these acts should have a shorter life span for the perpetrators.

Lynda A. Archer
Gabriola Island, British Columbia

Hidden Dragon

Kishore Mahbubani's supposition that the United States is young in comparison to China and therefore naïve or troublesome is a common fallacy ["What China Threat?," Criticism, February]. Our concepts of government, justice, and economy were not new in 1776—they were imports of the European Enlightenment, the Magna Carta, Roman law, and fifth-century BC Greece—whereas the current model of Chinese politics and economics is a more recent hybrid of capitalism and Chinese characteristics. One should keep in mind that this model has done well over the past forty years mostly because China had much room for growth at the outset, enjoying the architecture of global capitalism established by Western nations whose own growth has necessarily leveled off.

Charles Rice
Colorado Springs, Colo.

Just because China has learned not to use the raw military methods of past empires—relying instead on sharklike development loans and infrastructure projects—does not mean it won't use its military when the time is right. Mahbubani avoids mentioning that China's military spending is second only to that of the United States and is increasing. He creates the impression that only

the United States has issues with China, yet many developing nations with economies now closely entwined with China's have begun to recoil. Unlike the United States, China does little to stop its companies from corrupting local officials—further obstructing the world's movement to freer societies—and has adopted Russia's approach of shaping foreign political bodies through more discreet and indirect means.

The author is right that the United States needs a long-term strategic approach to China. In my view, that should entail the democracies of the world uniting economically against China's rise until China becomes a fair dealer and human rights defender; they must also be willing to use force if necessary to protect our ideals and way of life.

Anthony Buch
Seattle

Power and the Passion

Far more elderly women than men are caregivers for spouses with dementia or other long-term illnesses, yet we don't see a pattern of these women shooting, smothering, poisoning, or bludgeoning their husbands under the misnomer of "mercy killing," the term preferred by Ann Neumann ["Going to Extremes," Letter from Lancaster County, February]. Indeed, the physical and emotional burdens on female caregivers are often greater than on their male counterparts, and depression, stress, and overwhelming financial demands plague wives who must care for their husbands, too.

To say that cases in which men have violently ended their sick wives' lives only "highlight the consequences of rigid gender roles that designated men as their wives' protectors," ignores the myriad ways our society consistently devalues women's lives. Since when do the duties of a "protector" involve killing his charge?

Mary Giannakou
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EASY CHAIR

No Exit

By Lionel Shriver

For American liberals, the European Union is a bastion of social justice, secular humanism, and civic virtue. Taxed gratefully into equality, its subjects spend their days recycling kefir containers and protecting the realm from genetically modified foods. Only this wise, collegial institution prevents a recrudescence of World War II. After *Bush v. Gore* and Trump, it's to this land of milk and honey—or crème fraîche and Cointreau—that disgusted Democrats have threatened to decamp, although my compatriots rarely seem to go. That may be fortunate. Fantasies rarely survive close scrutiny.

For it's more the case that the EU is a bloated bureaucracy packed with pampered timeservers inventing gratuitous regulations to justify their sinecures. A fine idea when first conceived as a free-trade bloc, the profligate, power-hungry body has warped into a centralizing political project without asking the irrelevant little peons it governs whether they *want* a federated Europe. Originally meant to mutually benefit a handful of similarly scaled economies, the now unwieldy alliance has since absorbed a plethora of far poorer countries and is thus also evolving into a transfer union—to many a German's dismay.

The EU is antidemocratic by design; as the popularly elected European Parliament cannot originate legislation, its most considerable expenditure must be crate after crate of rubber stamps. Brussels's vaunted "freedom of movement" would be a pleasing arrangement as an exchange of labor—a British engineer moves to France, a French carpenter moves to the United Kingdom—but is unworkable when migration gushes all one way.

It is NATO that keeps peace in Europe. During the slow-motion car crash of the euro, the EU is more a source of discord. Should the UK's departure prompt some soul-searching humility, even a rethink about the EU's ultimate ambition to subjugate and effectively abolish the European nation-state, having one of its largest and oldest members walk out could theoretically do the high-handed cabal a world of good.

Yet American coverage of the surprise victory for Vote Leave in the UK's 2016 referendum was aghast. The bigoted barbarians had overrun Buckingham Palace with pitchforks and torches. Curiously, my compatriots rarely consider that we'd not want our country to join an autocratic bloc whose laws and courts supersede our own. (Well ... maybe we would just now.)

A UK resident for three decades, I doggedly out myself at London dinner parties as a Leave supporter—though I might skate safely on the chummy assumption that of course, as a half-way sane person, I backed Remain. I'm surely pitied and deplored behind my back, for even face-to-face I'm regarded as an exotic if slightly repellent zoo specimen. Declaring myself here is bound to have the same effect or worse. Yet perhaps, as a rare bird of a different color amid the monochrome flock of American columnists writing about Brexit ("economic suicide," according to Thomas Friedman), I will at least offer up another happy occasion for recreational contempt.

I lived for a dozen years in Belfast. Questioning daily why I gave a toss about arcane Troubles politics, I clung to what was really at stake: whether terrorism paid off. As I've watched Brexit

grind on, what seems increasingly at stake is whether democracy pays off.

Even if EU membership is indeed an economic advantage, is a higher GDP worth the price: the spectacle, conducted on an international stage, of the people's will in a democracy coldly defied? I don't think the answer is obvious.

With 73 percent of Parliament having supported Remain during the campaign, Brexit has been awkward from the get-go. Parliament delivered a decision to the people. The people gave the wrong answer. Ever since, Parliament has been trying to take the decision back. After all, what happens when you ask powerful people to do something they don't want to do? They don't do it.

The effort to subvert the electoral verdict really took off with the ingenious contrivance of the "hard" and "soft" Brexit, when the choice on the ballot was binary. The referendum itself did not present the option of "leave sort of but not really." These textural distinctions never arose during the campaigns, and only became common currency once the incorrect vote was in.

As branding, the "hard" and "soft" polarity is inspired. Softness calls up kindness, compassion, agreeable toilet paper, and bunny rabbits. Hardness evokes obduracy, mercilessness, uncomfortable seating, and extremism—e.g., "hard right." At a stroke, anyone advocating *actually leaving the European Union*—hitherto known as a Leave voter—was an intransigent kook from the reactionary fringe. Thus 52 percent of the electorate was neatly exiled to beyond the pale. Advocates of a "soft" Brexit—such continuing entanglement with the EU as to make the whole

fandango of “leaving” utterly pointless—are Remainers in Groucho glasses.

Most Remainers have never accepted the referendum result. Like the American press, British Europhiles immediately pilloried Leavers as racist for wanting to control their own immigration laws, though the immigrants to whom EU membership was germane were preponderantly white. Critics declared that representative democracies should never hold referendums, an argument Remainers never advanced in the days when they assumed they would win. Wishing the referendum had never been run became a form of magical thinking, as if marshaling sufficient regret could un-run the poll. Insults hurled at Leave voters—impugning the capacity of these half-wits and moral misfits to evaluate complex issues that were over their heads—echoed historical arguments against women’s suffrage and the enfranchisement of the working class.

Fatally for Leavers, after David Cameron fell on his sword, Conservatives selected a party leader who’d supported Remain, and who as prime minister would therefore spearhead an extraction that she didn’t believe in. Oh, to start, Theresa May talked a good game, eternally perseverating, “Brexit means Brexit!”—a mantra that, tellingly, quite vanished from her speeches by last summer. Like the name of the lobbying group Leave Means Leave, the tautology suggests insecurity over the government’s commitment to honoring the referendum. Otherwise Brexit would clearly mean Brexit, right?

The claim that British broadcasters, not least the BBC, have consistently displayed a Remain bias is barely even controversial. News anchors eagerly embraced the hard and soft paradigm, and have constantly referred to the UK’s departure without a deal first as “crashing out,” a train-wreck expression that blithely assumes the conclusion.

Pundits and politicians alike have argued for neutering the referendum result because Leavers didn’t have all the facts, had been misled by their politicians, and “didn’t know what they were voting for”—allegations that could probably be made about most electorates in the world. Multiple parliamentarians have asserted knowingly that

“no one voted to be poorer!”—although when polled in 2017, more than 60 percent of Leave voters were willing to accept “significant damage” to the British economy in return for political independence, and nearly 40 percent would even accept losing their jobs. Besides, if unintended consequences were grounds for invalidating a vote, we’d have to nullify most elections, or simply stop bothering to hold them to begin with.

Despite the tough “Brexit means Brexit!” rhetoric, Theresa May sent an ardent Remainer civil servant to negotiate with Brussels, from whose key decisions her pro-Leave “Brexit secretary” was often excluded, and two Brexit secretaries in a row resigned in dismay over the direction the negotiations were headed. At every vital juncture, she has accepted the EU’s terms and often ludicrous underlying assumptions—most lethally, that the UK is responsible for devising arrangements on the Irish Republic’s side of its border with Northern Ireland and that so much as a camera on that border is the end of the world. The resultant withdrawal deal overwhelmingly rejected by Parliament in January entailed a high degree of regulatory alignment, continued subjection to the European Court of Justice, the sacrifice of £39 billion with no strings attached, and potential entrapment in an EU customs union literally forever, with no mechanism of escape beyond “Mother, may I?” No wonder May has also stopped reciting the aphorism from her party’s 2017 manifesto, “No deal is better than a bad deal.”

In the political pandemonium following January’s legislative rejection of May’s withdrawal deal, all the soft, softer, and softest options entertained were so close to de facto EU membership as to make the whole exercise a farce. The one scalp the prime minister waved to the public was an end to EU freedom of movement. Yet among Leave voters, only 22 percent endorsed her deal, and 58 percent didn’t believe it respected the referendum—belying the notion that Leavers care solely about immigration.

As for still another referendum, it might sound democratic. If some voting is good, then surely more voting is better? The EU has a history of making electorates go back to the polls until

they get their minds right. But early this year, Britons believed by 47 percent to 39 percent that a second referendum was *antidemocratic*. The sole purpose of a so-called People’s Vote—a tag both bizarre and insulting; I’m sorry, but who voted last time?—is to overturn the 2016 result. (Only one in eight Leavers would countenance a do-over. Even if Leave support were unflagging, the question could be rigged—by splitting the Leave vote, or by taking an authentic departure off the ballot.) It’s even argued that because some older Leave voters have died and younger Remain supporters have come of age, the vote must be run again. But that logic sets a dodgy precedent. Close elections would be reenacted continually if the votes of dead people didn’t count.

Yet here’s a radical proposition: maybe Brexit, however it ends up, isn’t as important as it’s made out to be. Like many a protracted contest, Brexit long ago became crudely about who wins. Leavers thought they won in 2016, only to find the implementation of that triumph entailed yet another fight. But are the consequences of which faction prevails really so momentous? While the short term could involve disruption, in the big picture the UK would probably manage well enough outside the EU; England as an independent nation goes back a thousand years, its union with Scotland three hundred. Likewise, after participating in the European project for forty-seven years, the UK would endure bravely, I dare say, through forty-eight. Even a proper UK departure from the EU was never going to topple the bloc.

By embracing the campaign motto “Take Back Control,” Leavers were chasing a *feeling*. Yes, they hoped to tap the brakes on mass immigration, but the majority of UK incomers are from outside the EU. Leavers were more broadly motivated to restore British sovereignty, and so to revive national pride and a bolshie islander independence. It was gratifying to refuse to vote as they were told to.

For Remainers, the referendum was also emotional, and also concerned with identity. They were sophisticated Europeans, not “Little Englanders.” (Do my compatriots ever refer to “Little Americans”?) Emulating the very

haughtiness that puts their opponents off about their friends in Brussels, Remainers have been driven by a sense of superiority, a certainty that they are right (I've often allowed that on Brexit I might be wrong; I've never heard a Remainder say the same), and a disgust that these ignorant troglodytes could be allowed to victimize the whole population. Remainers have been intoxicated by a messiah complex. Their nation's very survival being at stake more than justifies attempting to overturn the biggest electoral exercise in British history.

Yet as a thought experiment, let's give each faction what it wants.

1. The UK cuts all institutional ties with the EU. Street parties in Leave constituencies festoon pedestrianized town centers with bunting. Cakes are iced with Union Jacks. Breweries release commemorative batches of Freedom Ale. Stands hawk the tacky gilded coffee mugs of the sort produced for royal weddings.

But most victories are fleeting. Once the paper flags are swept up, most of these voters' lives aren't faintly improved. They may have resented the bureaucracy in Brussels, but the British invented bureaucracy. Being clobbered by regulations from Westminster (whose tax code is twelve times the length of the King James Bible) proves little different from being hit over the head by the EU's common rule book. Since tweezing EU diktats from domestic legislation is like picking crabmeat, Parliament keeps most EU laws on the books anyway. Money is still tight. The weather still sucks. Marriages still founder. When anything subsequently goes wrong, whether politically, logistically, or economically, Leavers get the blame, including for what would have gone wrong without Brexit. The party sliding to hangover, that stirring sensation of emancipation subsides.

Meanwhile, stewing in antipathy, resentment, and self-pity, Remainers plot to rejoin. Any fallout short of the apocalypse they predicted is annoying.

2. Either BRINO (Brexit in Name Only) is locked in or the referendum is overturned outright. Remainers are smug, not to mention snuffy about submitting to so much turmoil only to sustain the status quo. But arch self-congratulation and palpable relief rapidly evaporate. History doesn't stand

still, and EU membership offers no safe harbor. Another, truly epic Mediterranean migration crisis, say, may oblige Britain to accept a large share of new arrivals, despite a crippling shortage of housing. Or fiscal collapse in Italy may force the UK to help bail out foreign banks on a ruinous scale.

But here I challenge my own thesis:

For Leavers, the perfidy kicks off nationwide consternation. As the UK nestles back into the European fold, dissenting commentators warn feverishly that the double cross will foster a catastrophic breach of public trust in democracy. These threats consistently sound hollow, like the Big Bad Wolf vowing to huff and puff and blow a little pig's house in when the abode is made of brick. That's what Remainers had figured out years earlier: widespread embitterment doesn't matter. Democracy never works all that well; votes are always diluted to the point of absurdity, like the active ingredients in homeopathic cures. The populace is always disillusioned with politicians. So big whoop. A citizenry that doesn't believe in the legitimacy of its own elections affects neither democracy nor a sham of a democracy.

But Brexit-Schmexit might have electoral consequences. Should the Tories own the betrayal, incandescent Leavers could put Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in power by default. Lo, a Marxist prime minister poses a graver threat to Britain's well-being than Brexit ever did. To accommodate the scale of capital flight, they could finally have to build that third runway at Heathrow.

Yet this isn't France. Disgruntled voters don't burn cars and smash up Oxford Street. Earlier this year, the comment pages of the Tory *Telegraph* predicted that forsaken Brexiteers would: park in the wrong place; burn driver's licenses; buy yellow jackets; carry placards; cancel their BBC television licenses; pay council tax late (but not withhold it altogether), or even pay the tax in person—in pennies. *Ooh-ooh*.

In all probability, they don't even risk a parking ticket. The British are a biddable people, easily cowed by authority. Roundly deceived, defeated Leavers still pay their taxes on time—no pennies. ■

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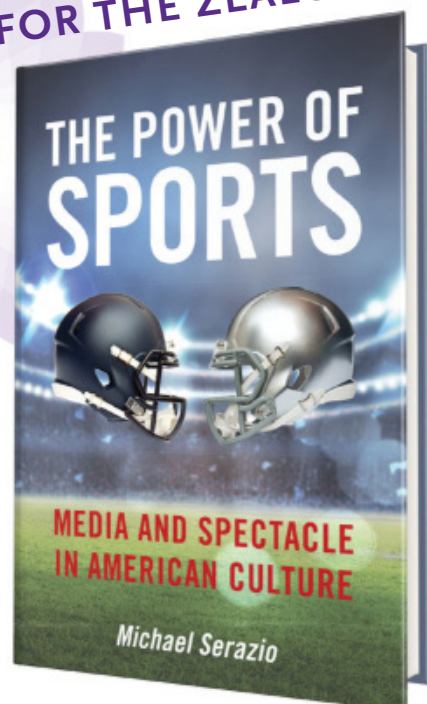
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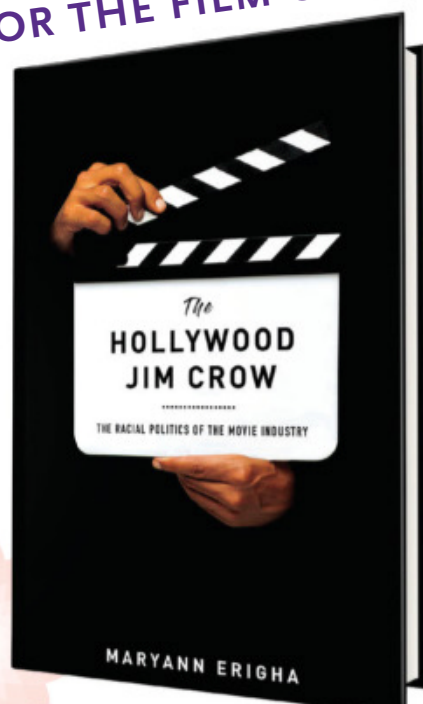
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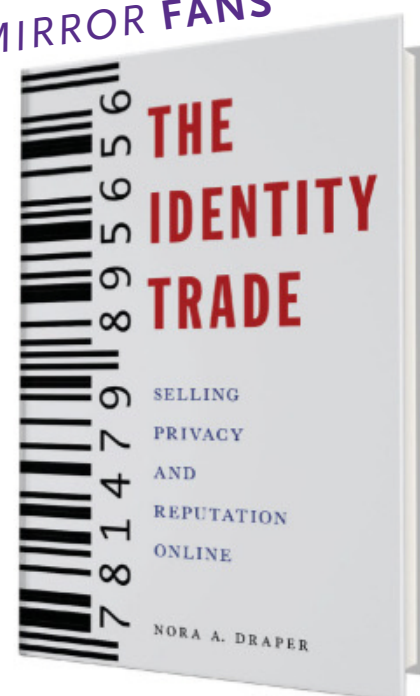
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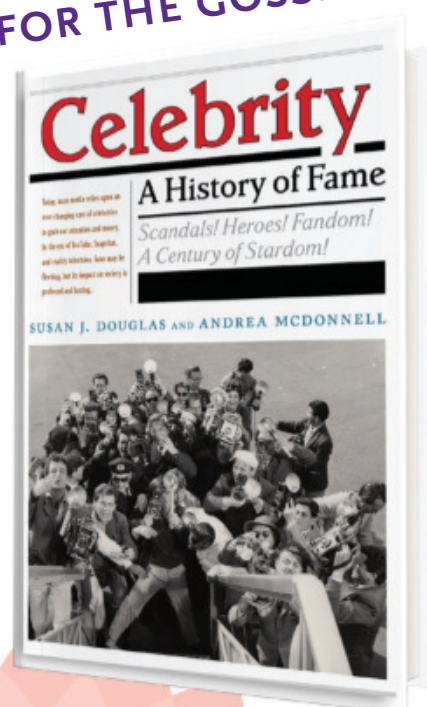
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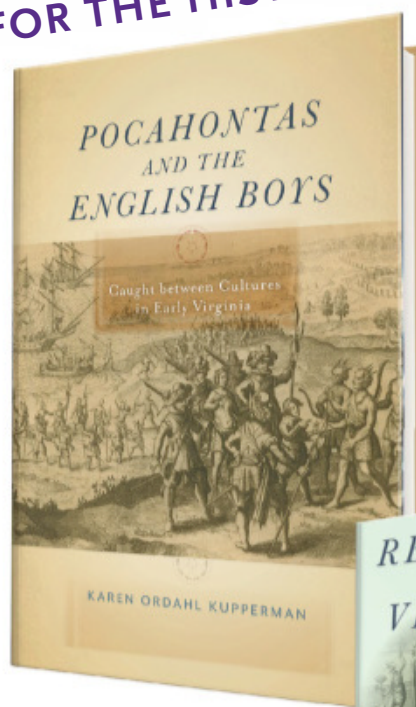
THE IDENTITY TRADE
Selling Privacy and
Reputation Online
By Nora A. Draper

FOR THE GOSSIP GALLS

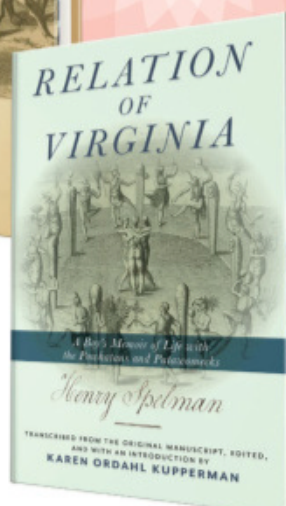


CELEBRITY
A History of Fame
By Susan J. Douglas and
Andrea McDonnell

FOR THE HISTORY LOVERS

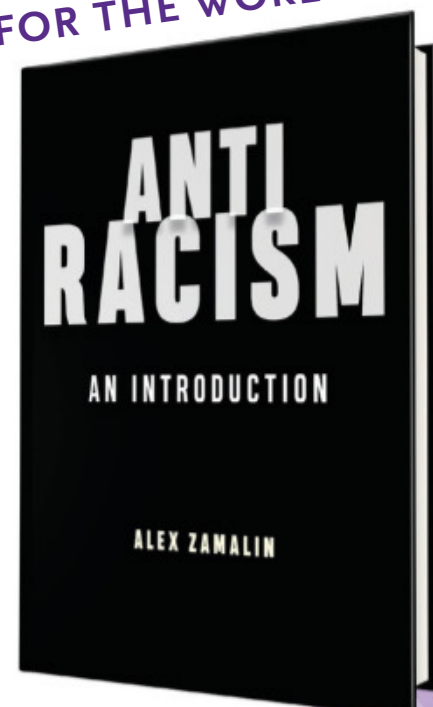


**POCAHONTAS AND
THE ENGLISH BOYS**
Caught Between
Cultures in
Early Virginia
By Karen Ordahl Kupperman



Also available: **RELATION OF VIRGINIA**
a memoir by Henry Spelman

FOR THE WOKE



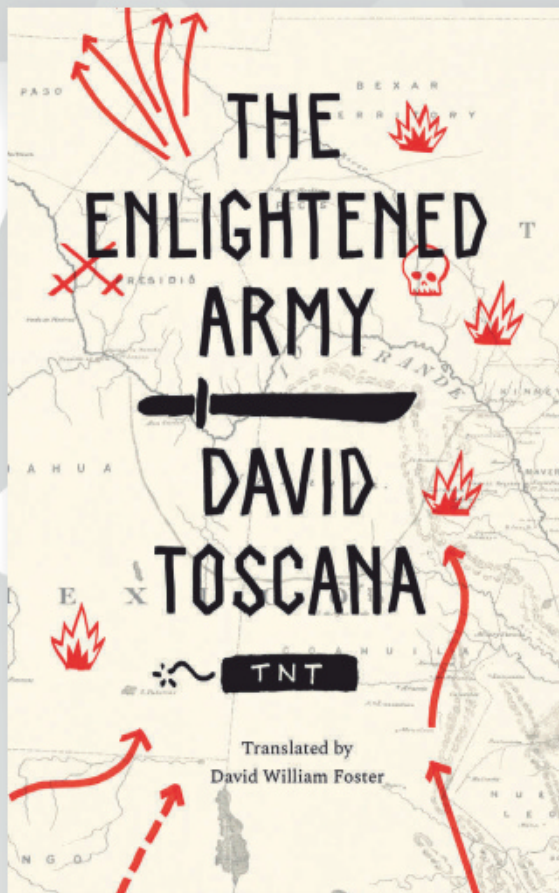
ANTI-RACISM
An Introduction
By Alex Zamalin

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HARPER'S INDEX

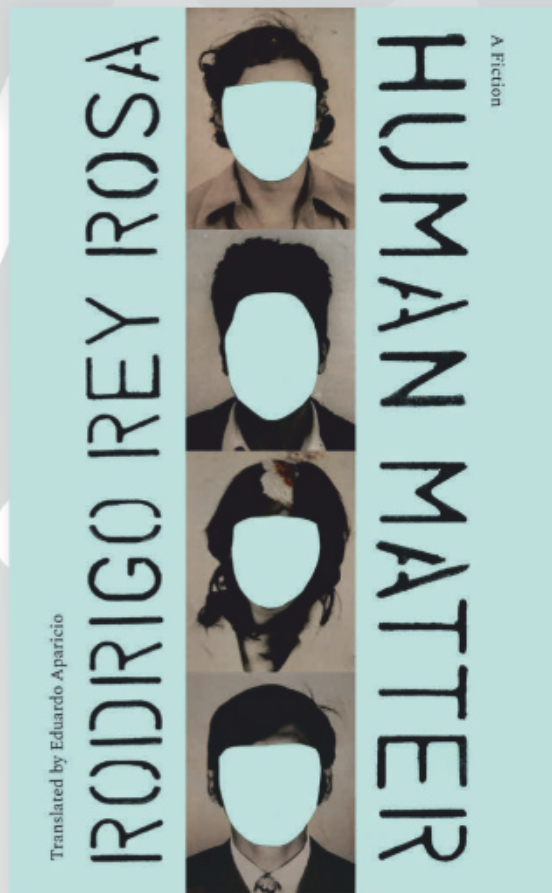
- Percentage change since 1975 in the portion of Americans who hold hunting licenses : -38
 - Number of states that allow roadkill to be salvaged for food : 31
- Number of the twenty least prosperous US congressional districts that are represented by Republicans : 16
 - Of the twenty most prosperous districts that are represented by Democrats : 20
- Percentage of statewide elections in the Deep South won by Republicans since 2008 : 97
- Number of new Confederate statues that have been constructed on public grounds since 2015 : 1
- Percentage of Southern white Americans who say the country must “protect and preserve its white European heritage” : 30
 - Of Southern black Americans who do : 28
 - Rank of Arabic among France’s most spoken languages : 2
 - Percentage of French students who study Arabic in secondary school : 0.2
- Net loss of foreign-language programs at US colleges and universities from 2009 to 2013 : 1
 - From 2013 to 2016 : 651
- Percentage increase from 2012 to 2017 in the number of US college graduates who major in computer science : 51
 - In the number of students who earn PhDs in computer science : 17
- Portion of 2017 computer science PhDs who pursued work in industry rather than academia : 2/3
- Factor by which graduate students are more likely to experience depression or anxiety than the general population : 6
 - Percentage of Indians with graduate educations who are unemployed : 16
 - Of Indians who are illiterate : 2
- Percentage change in the value of the US market in adult fiction books from 2013 to 2017 : -16
 - In children’s and young-adult fiction books : +11
- Factor by which Facebook users over 65 are more likely to share stories from fake news sites than users between 18 and 29 : 7
- Percentage of US adult Facebook users who are unaware the company categorizes them according to their interests : 74
 - Of users who feel their assigned categories do not accurately describe them : 27
- Percentage of Americans born before 1946 who know someone who identifies with gender-neutral pronouns : 7
 - Of Americans born after 1996 : 35
- Number of minutes by which the average American man has more leisure time each day than the average woman : 33
 - Percentage of this extra time that men spend watching television : 65
- Percentage of Americans who said global warming was personally important to them in the spring of 2018 : 63
 - In the fall of 2018 : 72
- Percentage of US adults in 1978 who said that the country’s levels of consumption were “immoral” : 65
 - Who say so today : 46
- Chance that an American CEO expected global economic growth to slow last year : 1 in 50
 - That a CEO expects global economic growth to slow this year : 3 in 10
- Average age of an American with at least \$25 million in 2014 : 58
 - In 2018 : 47
- Percentage of US adults who say they would rather talk about their own death than money : 57
 - Percentage of Americans aged 18 to 34 who say they’d like to live forever : 24
 - Of Americans over 55 : 13
- Factor by which the rate of asteroids hitting Earth has increased over the past 290 million years : 3

*Figures cited are the latest available as of February 2019. Sources are listed on page 65.
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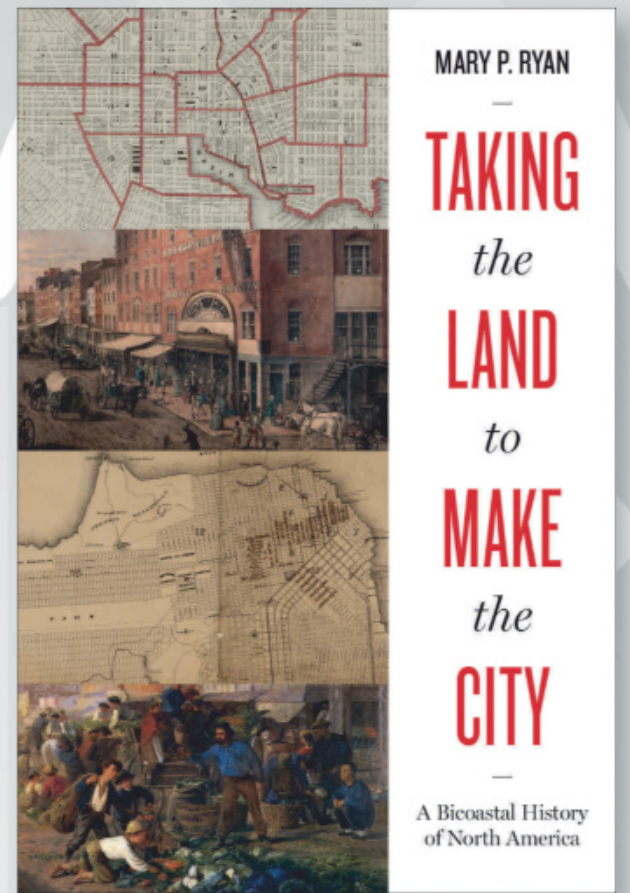
The Enlightened Army

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TRANSLATED BY DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER
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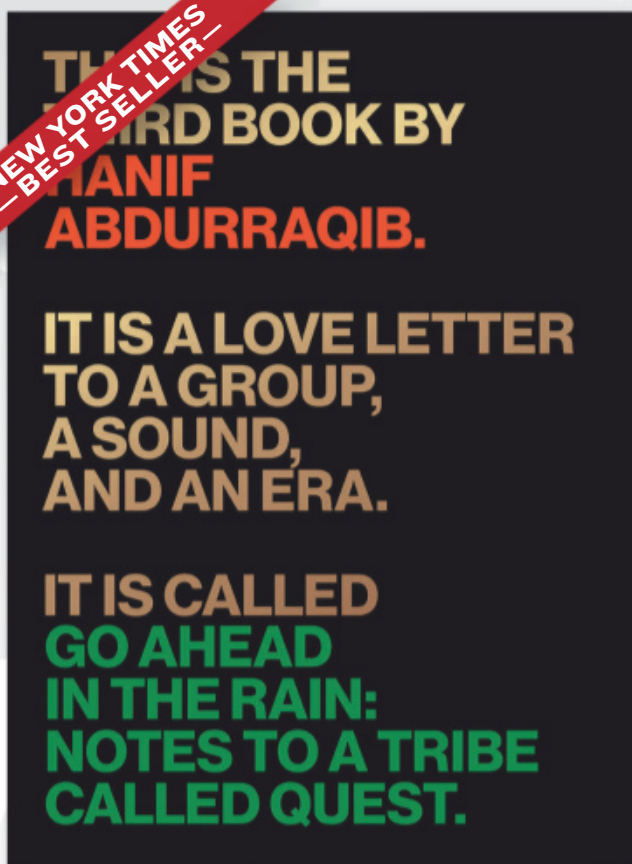
Human Matter

A Fiction
BY RODRIGO REY ROSA
TRANSLATED BY EDUARDO APARICIO
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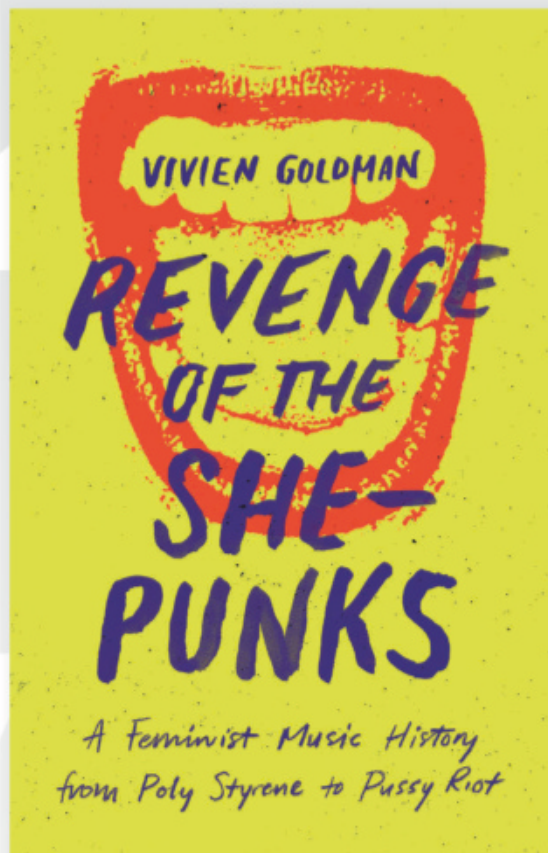
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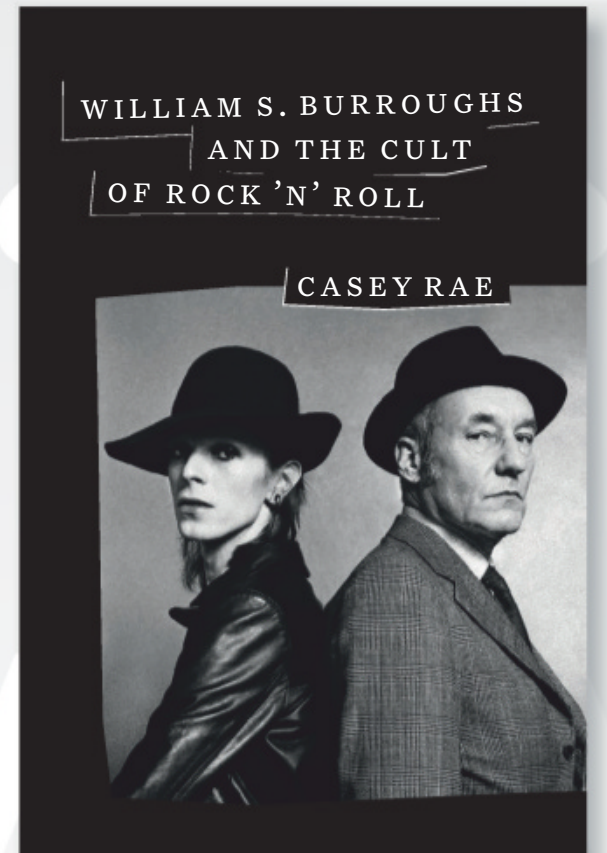
Go Ahead in the Rain

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BY CASEY RAE
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\$27.95 hardcover

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS



READINGS

[Discussion]

SALABLE VIRTUES

By Rony Brauman, from *Humanitarian Wars?*, which will be published in April in the United Kingdom by Hurst. Brauman, a physician, was president of Doctors Without Borders from 1982 to 1994. This conversation, with journalist Régis Meyran, took place in the spring of 2017. The book was translated from the French by Nina Friedman.

“IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FORMULATE A GENERAL
LAW FOR INTERVENTION”

RÉGIS MEYRAN: Let's discuss the series of wars conducted by the West, which the media and politicians portrayed as “just.”

RONY BRAUMAN: By “just wars” we mean wars ostensibly motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns, that is, the protection of civilian populations: saving a population from a famine in Somalia, an impending massacre in Kosovo, or oppression in Afghanistan. I draw a distinction between these and other wars or military operations fought in the name of security, such as the war in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2002 or in Iraq since 2003.

MEYRAN: Why is the idea of “just war,” in itself, a problem?

BRAUMAN: Because, while claiming to protect populations, the United Nations is rehabilitating war—when in fact it was created to prevent it. And in granting itself the right to declare war and to call it “just,” the UN is acting as both referee and player, and legalizing the conflation of judges and parties to a conflict.

I reject the very notion of just war as a contradiction in terms; war is a lie, war is hell—it can never be just. But unless I wanted to take a radical pacifist position—which I respect but do not share—I feel it necessary

to understand the exceptions, that is, the situations in which war might be justified, and on what terms.

MEYRAN: A just war is based, legally, on the “responsibility to protect”; can you explain what that phrase means?

BRAUMAN: Basically, the legitimacy of the use of force rests on the seriousness of the threat, on its being used only as a last resort, and on the proportionality of the response. There one would find, together with “reasonable chance of success,” the classic criteria for just war that have been around since Thomas Aquinas.

“Legitimate authority” and “proportionality of the response” are legal in nature, falling under international law. The other two criteria are far more interesting to me, because they are more political, or politico-ethical. How much violence can one tolerate while hoping to stop it by nonviolent means? The questions of “last resort” and of “reasonable chance of success” imply an ability to calculate the final outcome. As the political theorist Michael Walzer reminds us, “The object in war is a better state of peace”—that is, a more secure situation than what existed before. And there lies the crux of the problem: How do we define success? We all remember the infamous “Mission Accomplished” of George W. Bush, dressed up as a pilot and posing on an aircraft carrier, after the fall of Baghdad. And we know what happened after that.

In a public debate on the right to intervene, political scientist Pierre Hassner cited two contradictory ideas from the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz: On one hand, no sensible person would start a war without a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish with the war and how they want to conduct it. On the other hand, because of friction, the fog of war, and changing means leading to

changing objectives, no war ends as originally planned. These two ideas, synthesized by Hassner, sum up the inherent practical contradiction whenever one goes to war, whether humanitarian or not: while a clear idea of the ends and the means is essential, the unforeseen dynamics of the war make that impossible. He infers from this that it is impossible to formulate a general law of armed intervention, but argues that the question needs to be asked in particular situations.

That is to say, a war's "reasonable chances of success" are impossible to assess when the stated aims are vague and general—like democracy, women's liberation, general well-being, and so forth. Or as Walzer more bluntly puts it, "foreign intervention, if it is a brief affair, cannot shift the domestic balance of power in any decisive way toward the forces of freedom, while if it is prolonged . . . it will itself pose the greatest possible threat to the success of those forces." They can, however, be assessed when the aims are precise and narrow—like destroying terrorist training camps, as the United States did in Afghanistan in 2001.

"IT TURNED INTO A WAR FOR CIVILIZATION"

MEYRAN: The United States claimed Afghanistan was a moral war. Perhaps we should distinguish between the various phases of that conflict.

BRAUMAN: Indeed. It was hard to argue with the United States' initial response after the September 11 attacks, because an attack like that cannot go unanswered. But two objectives were mixed up at the outset: overthrowing the Taliban regime in Kabul, and destroying Al Qaeda training camps. The terrorist organization, a legitimate target, was wrongly identified with the Afghan government—which, though it did allow Al Qaeda to set up shop in the country, was not involved in the attacks. The Afghan Taliban—which is not a political party but a kind of relatively diversified front—is an organization of nationalists, first and foremost. Islamic nationalists, admittedly, but not international jihadis. They do use terrorism, that's indisputable, but only within their own borders and against an identified local enemy.

During the first phase of the American invasion in Afghanistan, an international law enforcement operation in 2001 and 2002, American forces destroyed a substantial portion of Al Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan. Although they missed bin Laden, they were able to hunt for him using law enforce-

ment methods, as pointed out by the many politicians and specialists criticizing the very notion of a war on terror at that time. And as you no doubt remember, the US Department of Defense dubbed the operation "Operation Infinite Justice," before renaming it "Operation Enduring Freedom." After a start like that, it's no surprise that what followed looked like a war for civilization.

MEYRAN: But how did the hunt for Al Qaeda leaders turn into a war for civilization?

BRAUMAN: The Taliban fell six weeks after the offensive began, and an interim government led by Hamid Karzai was installed in late 2001. Foreign forces could have begun to withdraw at that point, leaving the Afghan people to find their own political solution, but the opposite occurred. Foreign contingents were beefed up, NATO was deployed under the appellation ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), and magical concepts that had emerged in the 1990s arrived in force: state-building, confidence-building, nation-building, peace-building, and so on. Roads, bridges, and schools were constructed, young people were trained, and hospitals were renovated. The pacificatory expeditionary force continued to grow throughout the decade, creating a flourishing market for private security companies. But it was no obstacle to the Taliban's seemingly inexorable advance. The numerous military blunders and hundreds of resulting deaths, the colonialist behavior, the onerous American tutelage, the double-dealing of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the pervasive corruption, and the hostility created everywhere by the continuing presence of foreign armies are enough to explain the success of the Islamist rebellion. Everyone in that expat world—humanitarian workers, consultants, civilian members of the various international organizations, and mercenaries—all of them were well aware that ultimately, in one way or another, the Taliban would return to power.

"DO YOU WANT SOMEONE CUTTING OFF YOUR DAUGHTER'S ARM?"

MEYRAN: So how did the US government get France, for example, to agree to the war, in a context of likely defeat and military deaths?

BRAUMAN: Women's rights became a favorite rationalization over the course of time. In the early 2000s, the intellectual and political context was suddenly repolarized by a new global enemy, jihadism. In France there were fiery debates over the "veil" and "Islam and the Republic," with the September 11



The Time Vivarium-97, a work on paper by Sun Xun, whose work is on view this month at ShanghART Gallery, in Singapore.

attacks as a backdrop. The secular Republic—as defended by Sarkozy, Hollande, and then Valls, along with numerous intellectuals and editorial writers—conveniently united the fight against Islamist obscurantism in France with that in Afghanistan. It was a matter of liberating women from their “cloth prison”—an oft-used expression—while fighting for our security against terrorism. Another double brainwashing. And it goes without saying that no one in Afghanistan was attempting to free women from their veils.

MEYRAN: Was France a participant in this moral crusade to impose Western values by force?

BRAUMAN: In a word, yes. France’s military involvement—intended primarily, it seems to me, to please our US allies so they would forgive our opposition to the invasion of Iraq—had to be cloaked in other, more salable, virtues. There was security, of course, but the Taliban posed no credible threat to France or

to Europe. More was needed, and the unifying theme of “France’s universal values”—the values it’s up to us to share and spread throughout the world—fit the bill.

Nicolas Sarkozy illustrated the barbaric treatment of women in several interviews, claiming that women wearing nail polish were having their arms cut off by the Taliban. I don’t know where he got that story, since no one ever asked him—in any of the interviews I saw, in any case. But the moment I heard it, it reminded me of the rumor that was around during the Vietnam War that the Vietcong were cutting off the arms of children vaccinated by the US Army. The French accused the Germans of something similar during World War I, but few were apparently struck by that similarity, either, and despite the hyperbole—“Do you want someone cutting off your wife’s or daughter’s arm? I don’t!”—the story was taken at face value. Journalists and legislators

were rightly worried about the stalemate and the losses, and more generally about the impasse in which the foreign forces found themselves, but they seemed ignorant of the fact that even that final justification for our presence was based only on a worn-out piece of propaganda.

MEYRAN: Walking such a fine line isn't easy: on one side, criticizing Western lies, and, on the other, acknowledging the Taliban's terrible violence.

BRAUMAN: I'm not arguing with the fact that women are oppressed in Afghanistan, but rather with using it to justify our military presence, as if military power was a response to male violence.

I think it's completely reasonable to use the condition of women—and gay people, as well—as a marker of democracy, provided it is applied everywhere. Would we consider invading India, or imposing sanctions on it, on the grounds that it's one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women, with its female infanticide, forced marriage, dowry crime, and rape? In Mexico, mass killings, sex crimes, and mutilations of women have all reached frightening proportions since the cartel wars began, but no one would think of sending an expeditionary

force there to sort things out. The fact remains that people never talk about violence against women as much as when it happens in a Muslim country. And yet we treat these issues differently when they occur in countries that are allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries, or in conflict situations such as in regard to Iran and Afghanistan. In France, a woman is killed by her spouse every three days, and there are tens of thousands of rapes each year, yet we don't blame such horrors on our country's dominant Catholic culture.

**“BRAINWASHING IS PART AND PARCEL OF
MODERN WARFARE”**

MEYRAN: Is there a total disconnect between the moral justification for the war in Afghanistan and its true political reasons?

BRAUMAN: Yes. The fundamental reason France got involved—and not just France—was to be at the Americans' side. Political analyst Bertrand Badie showed how France became pro-NATO after the Iraq War. It was to demonstrate our solidarity, even if it meant getting bogged down in what was quickly becoming an absurd war. But since those were not convincing enough reasons for the public, whose support is required in a democracy, an incontrovertible moral justification had to be given. Nothing new there; brainwashing is part and parcel of modern warfare, so we're on familiar ground.

MEYRAN: But when you think about the logic behind these moral wars—about wanting to create a state ex nihilo, about wanting to impose an ideology with little regard for reality, all via having a strong army and waging war—doesn't that reflect a problem in terms of democracy as well? Can a true democracy behave like that? Political journalists in the mainstream media can't point out contradictions in speeches or identify ideological problems; often, they shut up altogether with an all-powerful head of state. Isn't that a failure of democracy as well?

BRAUMAN: No doubt, but in the sense that a hospital-acquired infection is a failure by the hospital, or in the sense of pharmacons, where remedy and poison are inextricably linked. Democracy is precious because it's a political system that incorporates the idea of its own imperfection, and thus the utility of criticism.

The historian Marc Bloch spoke of World War I as “an immense experiment in social psychology.” Fake news can only survive “on

[Review]

SOUTHERN FAN

From descriptions, published in a music review by Texas senator John Cornyn, of Neil Young's 1972 album Harvest. The article was printed in February of that year in the Trinitonian, the newspaper of Trinity University, in Texas, where Cornyn was a student.

Is genuine
Is polished
Is multifaceted
Contains simple tunes
Contains surprising orchestrations
Contains lyrics that drive listeners crazy
Reveals Young's nature
Reveals Young's previously hidden emotions
Dwells on the futility of Young's relationships
with the opposite sex
Indicates that Young has been shafted by more
women than any man alive



Photographs of toys made by children in the Bidi Bidi refugee settlement, Uganda, by Nora Lorek.

one condition: that it finds a favorable cultural broth.... In it," he adds, "people unconsciously express all their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all of their strong emotions." Again, unique—and therefore unpredictable—circumstances are always required in order for those emotions to result in decisions as grave as going to war.

MEYRAN: While Bloch studied false news from war, we were dealing with far more than that with something like the supposed weapons of mass destruction the United States said were in Iraq: an enormous lie of international proportions. I find it astonishing that the vast majority of the Western world swallowed a lie like that.

BRAUMAN: No, the entire Western world—the entire world, in fact—denied it. You have to remember the protests all over the world, and in Western Europe in particular. Not always for the right reasons, at first, if you think about international polling showing that a significant portion of the world's population thought that the September 11 attacks were a CIA fabrication. But the

propaganda worked admirably in the United States, where more than half of the population supported the "preemptive war" against a "new Hitler."

That said, the war—the disastrous repercussions of which we're still living with today—would not have been possible without Prime Minister Tony Blair's "I'll be with you, whatever" promise to George W. Bush, against the advice of the British people who, like the French and other Europeans, were opposed to it. Echoing the WMD theme, he reported having "information" that Iraq could deploy those WMD within forty-five minutes, which made neutralizing them seem like an emergency. The UK sent forty-five thousand soldiers to Iraq, a significant military contribution, and made the war politically feasible by ending US isolation on the issue. I would also note that the British Parliament conducted a lengthy investigation and in 2016 published an extremely detailed report—over six thousand pages—highly critical of Britain's involvement in



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CATHERINE EDELMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO

"DNA #7797L-#7801R, 2018," a photograph by Michael Koerner, whose work was on view in March at the CEG Salon, in Chicago.

Iraq. We're still waiting for its French counterpart to do the same for France's military engagements. Blair was profoundly shaken by this, however, and responded to the criticism by defending his decision: "I believe we made the right decision and the world is better and safer."

MEYRAN: And have moral wars based on lies made the world any safer? I'm not sure about that...

BRAUMAN: I can't help thinking that the world would be safer had those responsible for its safety—I'm speaking, ironically of course, about the permanent members of the Security Council—not charged headlong into these foolhardy ventures. As we speak, Donald Trump is announcing an increase in American troop levels in Afghanistan, where 31,000 Afghan civilians and 2,400 American soldiers have died since October 2001—an appalling toll, in addition to more than 20,000 civilians wounded and nearly a trillion dollars spent. While I am sure that Trump couldn't care less about the just war doctrine, this does show that a war that could be initially labeled a just response to aggression was continued under another pretext—that is, "civilization."

[History]

OCCIDENTS HAPPEN

From the opening lines of chapters in A Short History of Europe, by Simon Jenkins, published in March by PublicAffairs Books.

It helps to be a god. As Zeus gazed along the Phoenician shore, his eye fell on a fair princess named Europa playing on the beach.

If Greece was founded by a princess raped by a bull, Rome was founded by a baby suckled by a she-wolf.

From the moment of Diocletian's division of the Roman Empire, Europe moved into a state of transition.

The old imperial heartland of Italy, new home to the defeated Ostrogoths, now lay open to anarchy and invasion.

The concentration of power on which Charlemagne's empire relied went into decline.

The emperor approached the pope with a plea to heal the now forty-year-old Great Schism. He was desperate.

The pope intended Christian Europe to be an empire of the spirit under his command. But

though Europe might devote its soul to the service of one master, the church, its body was in the service of others, kings and emperors.
 The church was aware of its critics.
 The Renaissance and the Reformation were processes as well as periods.
 The rulers of medieval Europe acquired legitimacy through force of arms.
 The princes left Europe's conflicts unresolved.
 France faced what the best-known student of its politics, Alexis de Tocqueville, called "the most dangerous moment for a bad government ... when it sets about reform."
 The French Revolution lasted barely five years, but it shook Europe to the core. It witnessed in turn representative government, mob rule, terror, collapse, and eventually dictatorship.
 The failures of the reformist upheavals may have disappointed revolutionaries, but they galvanized ideologues.
 Memoirs of the turn of the twentieth century dwell on Indian summers and imperial autumns. They list moments when a bold statesman, a wise decision, or sheer luck might have averted the forthcoming tragedy. In retrospect, the period was one of self-satisfaction and overconfidence, but its starkest feature was a lack of leadership.
 The Versailles Treaty was a low point in European diplomacy. It left resentment throughout Germany and bitterness that others were not sharing their war guilt.
 The start of the Second World War was like an opening in a game of chess—predictable.
 Europe confronted a bald fact. A continent that fifty years earlier had confidently ruled a third of the world's population had torn itself to pieces.
 The world watched mesmerized as the once-mighty Soviet Empire gave a sigh, tottered, and collapsed. It vanished.

[Anomalies]

COME AS YOU ARE

From accounts of nonsexual orgasms documented in "Orgasm Range and Variability in Humans: A Content Analysis." The study was published in the International Journal of Sexual Health in November of last year.

I had eight or ten during labor with my first child.

Breastfeeding. I can't even look at women who are breastfeeding now because it brings me

back that feeling. If I have any more children, I don't think I'll be able to breastfeed them.

I had one once passing a kidney stone.

When I get a tattoo. I'm pretty sure my artist knows.

I have orgasmed when my cats have climbed on my lower back and kneaded my skin and purred. I've always felt very weird about that, and it doesn't happen often because I don't let them lie on me like that anymore.

I've had them after a bad sunburn, when my back is peeling in the spot I can't reach, and my boyfriend peels my skin off for me.

I can orgasm from itching a mosquito bite or athlete's foot.

I once stuck my feet out the window of a moving car. The wind tickled them and I had a orgasm.

Walking barefoot on unfinished or weathered wood always makes me orgasm.

[Poem]

AMERICA

By Solmaz Sharif, from a manuscript in progress. Sharif's previous collection of poetry, Look, was published in 2016 by Graywolf Press.

I had
 to. I
 learned it.
 It was
 if. If
 was nice.
 I said
 sure. One
 more thing.
 One more
 thing. Eat
 it said.
 It felt
 good. I
 was dead.
 I learned
 it. I
 had to.

Using a head scratcher, the kind with a lot of little flexible arms. I bought one when I was depressed.

Swabbing my ears. Most days I'd rather do that than have sex.

I came while cutting a guy's mohawk in my bathroom. Wasn't into the guy.

At a musical-theater conference, someone was singing "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables," and I was listening and enjoying. When he hit the high note, I came.

Deftones' "You've Seen the Butcher" in concert caused one of the most intense orgasms I've had. Other Deftones, Silversun Pickups, Jimi Hendrix, Tricky, and Nine Inch Nails songs also get the same response.

Whenever I dance or even listen to club music. Best part is, I work in a nightclub.

Eating a perfectly ripe cherry tomato.

I've had one eating really good, really rich chocolate—sometimes cupcakes, sometimes chocolate bars. I call them "chocogasms."

Every time I eat tuna—something about the texture in my mouth.

When using a balloon whisk and vigorously beating egg whites until they form soft peaks. One of the less obvious pleasures of home baking.

I'm a bag handler for a major airline, and sometimes, when I'm in the bottom bin of an airplane, stacking people's bags, I get a very intense orgasm while I'm mid-lift of a bag. It's extremely embarrassing if someone is in the bin with me because I yell out and can't move my arms while it happens. They always think I've hurt my back.

Every time the flight I'm on takes off. Or if I can hear a flight take off.

When I was talking to my best friend late at night. There was a pause in the conversation and I looked at her and immediately started to orgasm.

Painting has given me the best orgasms. I started art school two years ago, and I don't paint anymore because it's too sexual for me.

I was caught shoplifting in a major retail store. They sat me on a bench inside the store's little spy room, and I was terrified. The security

guard started asking questions, but the moment he said he was going to call the cops, I was surprised by a big orgasm.

During my AP Statistics test in high school. The proctor told me I had five minutes left and I came.

While reading a letter of recommendation for grad school. I also cried. It was from my favorite professor.

At the culmination of a terribly good novel. It was a classic, horror-based Stephen King.

I once had an orgasm in a grocery store checkout line while reading Stephen King's *On Writing*. He said something beautiful and thought-provoking. And bam!

[Fiction]

THE INDIRECT WORLD

By Clarice Lispector, from The Besieged City, a novel that will be published this month by New Directions. Lispector's novel The Chandelier was published last year by New Directions. Edited by Benjamin Moser and translated from the Portuguese by Johnny Lorenz.

On one of his final business trips, instead of leaving his wife on Market Street, Mateus rented the little house on the island for her, hoping the sea would give her some color.

At the first excuse, because of a missing cheese, Lucrécia Neves Correia had fought with the maid and dismissed her. And finally—alone with her former careful way of living—she'd notice each creak of wood, keep an eye on the roses growing in the garden, do quick laps, and give sharp cries of recognition. At night the cut roses would dimly illuminate the bedroom and leave the woman sleepless; the waters beating on the distant beach wanted to transport her but the croaking of frogs was monitoring her from close by.

She'd fall asleep watchful as if dawn could find the house surrounded by horses. And it would resemble the first night of sleep after someone was buried.

The spider had already woven several webs in the window when the woman headed down the road that would take her to the center of town.

At dusk, tired of walking around, she saw finally Doctor Lucas's office open and from it a

man emerge with a heavy gait. He seemed to her quite aged yet as calm as she'd remembered him. The woman quickly crossed the sidewalk and stood before him laughing quietly.

In the half-darkness she didn't see his surprise but heard his muffled voice mumbling her name, and she grew serious for still being that person they could call: Lucrécia Neves from São Geraldo.

They took a walk through the city park. The doctor was pointing out to her the public monuments ... and from afar the sanatorium where his wife now lived, forcing him to relocate his practice to the island.

Lucrécia was strolling beside him, the small city darkening dizzily, the lights finally came on. The doctor even ended up buying her a little bag of bonbons, Lucrécia was looking uneasily at the dark sky.

She spoke to him of Mateus, of the house on Market Street, in the night that the sea was filling with salt, but nothing was reaching its own end, the breeze was bringing and taking away the words and the lampposts were being deformed in the water.

Doctor Lucas, calm as a man who really worked. It was somehow humiliating to realize that, strong and hardly talkative, he was neither revealing nor concealing himself.

When he went to assist her with her coat, and while he was brushing his arm across her shoulders—for just an instant Lucrécia Neves leaned back ... had he made her arms more lively? had he noticed? or was she imagining it? Out of uncertainty the hazy light of a lamppost lit up, the instant turning gold in the night, out of uncertainty and delight the little lady was breathing, observing severely the car that was moving ahead over the irregular stones: the wheels were screeching and Doctor Lucas was speaking about what he'd done that day, she interrupting him with her errant mouth:

"Doctor Lucas, Doctor Lucas, you work too much, sir!" she was saying taking the opportunity to touch his clothes.

The doctor, with tired and vibrant eyes, was laughing at her...

"Ah!" mumbled the woman.

"What happened ..."

"That star," she said with tears in her eyes in a sincerity that, in search of expression, was making her lie. "It's just that I turned around and saw the star," she said, bathed by the grace of her lie.

This time the doctor looked at her through the darkness.

She blushed. But he was also looking at her with understanding and strength, leading her now with a first firmness through the dark lane, and avoiding touching her.

A moment more and, not touching, they were both thrown off balance, not touching was almost bringing them to a certain extreme point. Everything had become precious as if Lucrécia Neves Correia were holding such heavy things with her left hand: a low branch almost undid the bun in her hair, stealing from her a slightly painful exclamation of rapture.

"See," he said with clarity and strength, "on such a lovely night I'll have to work"—through the darkness he was looking at her, imposing on her, severely, a more dignified attitude ...

"... Impossible!" she yelled, shattered, her happy chest lighting up without paying attention to the man's warning. "Impossible to work so much," she added foolishly.

"Can you see all right?" asked the doctor imperiously.

He wanted to take responsibility for what he had unleashed, and did he look guilty? She obeyed with her mouth half-open.

"Here we are"—the jammed door was cracking open and the man smiled—"did the walk do you any good?" he asked in another tone.

"It did, doctor."

[Performance Review]

TURNDOWN SERVICE

From reviews, published on TripAdvisor, of the Henn-na Hotel, a robot-run resort in Japan that laid off more than half its automated workforce in January.

Henn-na bills itself as a hotel staffed by robots
You get greeted by two dinosaur robots
The dinosaur says "thank you"
The baggage check is a robotic arm
Your bartender is on an iPad
Robo-vacuums clean the carpets
A robot carries the luggage
Churi is this silly doll on the nightstand that starts talking
At first it is exciting communicating with Churi
Churi is a native Japanese robot
Churi doesn't understand
Churi is kind of a hassle
Churi is not cooperative
During the night Churi becomes creepy
Churi says, "Hi! Are you talking to me?"
You ask Churi to be quiet
Churi keeps talking

Was the doctor angry? The frogs were croaking hoarsely.

"I don't know how to thank you, doctor ..."—she was speaking with effort, with an ardor slightly out of place, her hair fluttering.

"Don't thank me then," he responded curtly.

Oh how annoyed he was!

"Yes, doctor."

Through the darkness dimly illuminated by the proximity of the sea, he looking at her now curious, almost amused—finally smiling:

"Well then, good night, get some rest."

He reached out his hand thinking to meet hers and accidentally touched her arm—she blanched: "Good night," she answered, and the man walked off stepping on leaves.

She went into the house and turned on the light. Inside everything was lightweight, blown. The bed, the table, the lamp. Nothing could be touched—the slight and upright extremities in the wind. Why don't I go over and touch them? she couldn't and yawned, shivery.

Then she changed clothes and lay down. A gentle joy was already starting to circulate in her blood with the first warmth, her teeth were once again sharpening and her nails hardening, her heart finally becoming precise in beats hard and curt. She, succumbing to an extreme fatigue that no man would love. Fatigue and remorse and horror, insomnia that the lighthouse was haunting in silence.

She didn't want to take the path of love, it would be a too-bloody reality, the rats—the lighthouse lit her in a flash and revealed the unknown face of lust.

She started losing her mind imagining a conversation in which Doctor Lucas would seem even more severe, she even humbler, asking him, to buy time, a thousand questions that would be a dance around him, destined to confound the man's strength: Sir, do you like big houses? sir, do you believe in me? if I were about to die would you save me, sir? do you speak many languages, sir? that's wonderful! and quickly showing him her things: here's my house for the time being, this city looks so much like São Geraldo! That's my window.

So much shyness didn't come from shame, it came from beauty, from fear, she back again with the great frogs.

But suddenly humble, hard: I'll give you my life and nothing more. Doctor Lucas, one couldn't make up the expression he'd have just then, crying out: I want less than your life, I want you! She responding with pain, with modesty: When it comes to love it's undignified to ask for so little, buddy.

Once the tensest moment of the night had passed, some streak of humidity was finally broken, the waves were beating softly. The woman nodded off and Doctor Lucas mumbled a bit ri-

diculously with his somber face: so you don't know how to be free. And her answering: ah, I can't, you know, and she ended up free, so much that she fell asleep.

The next day she was waiting for him on the sidewalk in front of his office.

When he saw her he stopped short with the key in his hand, his lips pressed tight. He was irritated.

But she was looking at him, patient, modest; night was falling.

Without speaking Lucas closed the door of his office and they went off together. They were walking around the small city immersed in shadow. The woman would sometimes walk ahead, and Doctor Lucas would stop. She'd then go on ahead, fatigued in the park, making sure with a quick glance that he was still observing her; she'd go on, stumble, lean in perdition on the stone eagles, running her fingers over the reliefs. ... He was watching, mute—while Lucrécia Neves was displaying herself, trying to make herself understood in the only way she had to speak, displaying with monotonous perseverance; he becoming a harder man while watching—she carrying on silently, spinning around in front of him, working him with patience in order to form her counterpart in this world, looking at the low sky.

They went on. He belonging to his wife while, without getting discouraged, Lucrécia Neves was spinning around him; and the more the man was catching on, the more inscrutable he was becoming. Sometimes the woman would realize he was feeling the urge to get rid of her, he was so annoyed. But she'd keep on gently provoking him, with a resignation that would sometimes make her think she'd been walking in the dust for years without a single breeze to bring relief to the air. She was very tired. Eventually there was established between them at last a short and brusque relationship whose possibilities they wouldn't know how to measure: Lucas would take out a cigarette, she'd remove with insufferable gentleness the lighter from his hand, Lucas holding back a movement of repulsion; she'd light the small flame, conquering him, he, conquered but increasingly gruff: when she'd give him back the lighter, they'd go on.

One night they were standing on the hill. The dawn took on a sharp stained-glass tone; he with his dark face.

It was at this time that Lucas began to be scared. When the light of the lighthouse would pass over them, it revealed two unknown faces. Lucrécia Neves unknown, yes, but at peace, concentrated on her utmost surface. Sometimes a rapid contraction would pass over her face as if a fly had landed upon it. Then she'd move her hooves, patient. He unknown but already anxious, looking around, placing his hand on the trunk of the chestnut ... Then Lucrécia placed her hand on the trunk of



Spectrum of Life I, a painting by Tizta Berhanu, whose work was on view in March at Addis Fine Art, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

the chestnut. Through the tree Lucrécia was touching him. The indirect world.

Loving him, returning to the necessity of that gesture that was pointing things out and, with the same single movement, creating whatever there was of the unknown inside them—all of her was on the verge of that gesture when she was touching the trunk his hand was touching—just as she'd looked at a household object in order to reach the city: humble, touching whatever she could. For the first time she was tempting him through herself, and through the overvaluation of that small part of individuality that until now had not surpassed itself nor brought her to love of herself. But now, with a final effort she was tempting solitude. Solitude with a man: with a final effort, she was loving him.

Then she returned by the footpaths that were dawning.

Lucas finally said it was impossible.

Lucrécia was shocked as if unaware what this was all about, and he, seeing so much fake innocence, got mad. The woman started to cry, softly at first—she really did seem surprised by his haste—saying she'd been forever wounded, that

everything had been ruined forever, though both hardly knew what “everything” she was referring to; that she'd expected from him “some enormous thing, oh Doctor Lucas,” and that he'd wounded her forever, she was repeating amid tears and syllables swallowed by sobs. The man was looking at her with brutality, seeing her crying mixing up her words; she seemed pure and puritan. He said severely like a doctor: calm down. The weeping subsided immediately. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

But without tears she was horrible to look at. Her mouth so painted. Her face in the darkness was anonymous, repugnant, fantastic. The doctor fell silent confronted with this truth that had taken, to the surprise of his eyes, the form of a face. He wanted to ask how he'd wounded her but this no longer mattered; when he saw her face without disguise he knew he'd wounded her somehow. He also noticed that the woman hadn't complained about any single fact. Except about himself, which was as vague as it was serious and accusatory; he'd been struck.

Lucrécia was now keeping absent in the shadow, he couldn't see her nor did he know whom to address when he said in an empty and dry tone:

"I don't know what I'm to blame for but I ask forgiveness."—The light of the lighthouse revealed them so quickly that they couldn't see each other.—"I ask forgiveness for not being a 'star' or 'the sea'"—he said ironically—"or for not being something that gives itself," he said blushing. "I ask forgiveness for not knowing how to give myself even to myself—until now I've only been asked for kindness—but never to ...—in order to give myself in this way I'd lose my life if necessary—but again I ask forgiveness, Lucrécia: I don't know how to lose my life."

It had been his longest speech to date, and the most embarrassing. He'd spoken with difficulty and now was withdrawing into the dark. Was he understanding, more than she did, that Lucrécia might have been wanting just a gesture? asking for a feeling and nothing more?

He was hardly feeling the humidity of the night; he was walking serious, without future.

And Lucrécia too ... but no, beneath her futility she was working with time running out as in war. He wasn't feeling sorry for himself or for Lucrécia. He was calm, strong. Which hadn't stopped Lucrécia from rattling him, making him wonder now where his own guilt lay. Which became so great that there was no longer any punishment.

Individual life? The dangerous thing is that each person was dealing with centuries.

His awareness was still making him at least hide the joy of being alone. Now, however, it was no longer a question of protecting himself. It was a question of losing himself until reaching the minimum of himself, throbbing spot that Lucrécia Neves had almost awoken—and at last he'd no longer need to be anonymous in order to conceal his pride, at last, maybe, he'd no longer need to be such a good doctor.

What to make of Lucrécia, what to make of his wife who was embroidering in the sanatorium and would ask for red thread and lift her head hopefully when her husband arrived. And of Lucrécia? Some tiny emphasis seemed to be Lucrécia's only destiny, vehemence her only strength. Even before dying she was one of the raptured souls who even a tough man inhales in the air of the nights.

And Lucrécia's, was that the true surrendered life? the one that gets lost, the waves that rise furiously over the rocks, the mortal fragrance of flowers—and there was the sweet evil, the boulders now submerged by the waves, and in Lucrécia's innocence was evil, she waiting far away in the wind from the hill, waiting, sweet, dizzying, with her impure breath of roses, her neck crushable by one of his hands—she, waiting for him to heed at last the plea of the waves over the rocks and, leaping over the tallest escarpment of the night, unleash a howl, the long neigh with which

he'd respond to the beauty and perdition of this world: Who hadn't seen on windless nights how cruel and murderous the silver flowers were?

He wanted to reply, no longer to Lucrécia who was calling him—quickly he'd surpassed her, and if he were to speak he'd finally have managed to reply to a venetian blind flapping in the silence of a street, to a mirror that reflects, to everything that up till now we leave without an answer.

He'd waited his whole life for the moment in which he'd finally be lost.

He stopped again. The lighthouse was scanning the dark sky. Lucrécia's immobilized smile was passing through the clouds ...

But he didn't go back. He went ahead tough, a conqueror, heading toward the city that was the shelter of his strength. The closer he drew to the lights, the more he was vanquishing Lucrécia.

The next day the doctor had hardly worked, awaiting the moment in which he'd see if the woman was still waiting for him in front of his office or if she'd disappeared. But with sudden horror and sudden joy—he found her. Standing, modest, smiling with her animal patience.

Their sleepwalking strolls began anew. And when late at night they stopped upon the hill, she said:

"Fortunately everything is impossible," and started scratching at the ground with the tip of her shoe. "Because I think I'd hurt the one I loved," she added gently and without pride.

"What do I care how you'd hurt me," he said, irritated.

She immediately halted her small kicks in the dirt.

Dazed, almost recoiling, she was wondering how it was possible for him to love her without knowing her, forgetting that she herself knew no more of the man than the love he was giving her.

It seemed to her pointless to talk. Because all of a sudden on the hill beside him, calm love seemed to be pointing out all things like the gesture. Ever since she started loving him she'd found simply the sign of fate she'd sought for so long, that irreplaceable substance that you barely suspected in things, the irreplaceableness of death: like the gesture, love was being reduced until reaching the irreplaceable, with love you could point out the world. She was lost.

"Let's stay friends," said the man who also didn't know how to speak and who for that reason needed to be forgiven.

"Friends?" mumbled the woman in soft surprise, "but we were never friends"—she breathed with pleasure—"we're enemies, my love, forever."



"View Park, Number I," a photograph by Janna Ireland, whose work is on view this month at Antenna, in New Orleans.

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LIKE THIS OR DIE

The fate of the book review in the age of the algorithm

By Christian Lorentzen

1.

Alex and Wendy love culture. It's how they spend their free time. It's what they talk about at dinner parties. When they go jogging or to the gym, they listen to podcasts on their phones. On Sunday nights they watch their favorite new shows. They go to the movies sometimes, but they were bummed out when MoviePass went south, so now they mostly stream things. They belong to book clubs that meet every couple of weeks. Alex and Wendy work hard at their jobs, but they always have a bit of time to check their feeds at work. What's in their feeds? Their feeds tell them about culture. Their feeds are a form of comfort. Their feeds explain things to them that they already understand. Their feeds tell them that everyone else is watching, reading, listening to the same things. Their feeds tell them about the people who make their culture, people who aren't so different from them, just maybe a bit more glistening. Alex and Wendy's feeds assure them that they aren't lonely. Their feeds give them permission to like what they already like. Their feeds let them know that their culture is winning.

Christian Lorentzen is a writer living in Brooklyn.



Alex and Wendy believe in the algorithm. It's the force that organizes their feeds, arranges their queues, and tells them that if they liked this song, video, or book, they might like that one too. They never have to think about the algorithm, and their feeds offer a kind of protection. Alex hates to waste his time. His time is so precious. It makes Wendy feel sad when she reads a book she doesn't love. She might have read one of the books her friends loved. If their feeds lead them astray, Alex and Wendy

adjust them. There's only so much time, and when they have kids, there'll be even less time. Alex and Wendy aren't snobs. They don't need to be told what not to like. They'd rather not know about it.

Of course, I don't believe that Alex and Wendy exist. But as a cultural journalist, as a book critic, I've been put on notice that I work for them.

2.

It is a commonplace that we live in a time of political polarization and culture war, but if culture is considered not in terms of left and right but as a set of attitudes toward the arts, then, at least among people who pay attention to the arts, we live in an era that cherishes

consensus. The first consensus is that ours is an age of plenty. There is so much to watch, to hear, to see, to read, that we should count ourselves lucky. We are cursed only by too many options and too little time to consume all the wonderful things on offer. The cultural consumer (Alex or Wendy) is therefore best served by entities that point them to the right products. Find the right products, and you can undergo an experience you can share with your friends, even the thousands of them you've never met. Of course, individual

people have preferences and interests, so filters, digital or human, will be required. Everyone will have favorites. What's superfluous is the negative opinion. The negative opinion wastes Alex and Wendy's time.

No doubt a consumerist mode of engagement with the arts has always been with us. Its current manifestation mimics the grammar of social media: the likable, the shareable, the trending, the quantifiable, the bite-size. It is no surprise that this set of gestures has become dominant. What jars is the self-satisfaction expressed by people who should know better. Editors and critics belong to a profession with a duty of skepticism. Instead, we find a class of journalists drunk on the gush. In television, it takes the form of triumphalism: a junk medium has matured into respectability and its critics with it. In music, there is popitism, a faith that whatever the marketplace sends to the top must be good. Film and art writing were corrupted so long ago by slavish fixations on the box office and the auction price that it's now hard to imagine them otherwise. Literary journalism has been a holdout in this process of erosion: although literary blockbusters will tout that status when they achieve it, presence on the bestseller list has more often been seen as counter-indicative of quality, the crossover as a happy freak.

The traditional driver of literary coverage in newspapers and magazines has been book publishers' schedules. Books have been treated both as news and as objects to be evaluated. The primary mode of engagement has been the review, placed on the page in the vicinity of advertisements purchased by the publishers. That model is outdated. Books coverage now rises or falls in the slipstream of social media. The basic imperatives of the review—analysis and evaluation—are being abandoned in favor of a nodding routine of recommendation. You might like this, you might like that. Let's have a little chat with the author. What books do you keep on your bedside table? What's your favorite TV show? Do you mind that we're doing this friendly Q&A instead of reviewing your book? What if a generation of writers grew up with nobody to criticize them?

I am not making an elitist argument, though I'm skeptical of the popular and

the commercial. To be interested in literature all you need is a library card. Literary writing is any writing that rewards critical attention. It's writing that you want to read and to read about. It's something different from entertainment. It involves aesthetic and political judgments and it's not easily quantifiable. Negativity is part of this equation because without it positivity is meaningless. There is a new wave of writers rising in America, writers such as Yaa Gyasi with her formally daring historical fiction; Patricia Lockwood, pioneer of a digital-native lyricism; Karan Mahajan, a political novelist for a post-globalized era; Nico Walker, the opioid epidemic's hard-boiled chronicler; and Jenny Zhang, with her incandescent rendering of the lives of migrants and their children; to name a few. (I've reviewed their work, so consider this my list of recommendations—you can take it or leave it.) They are being published by an ever-consolidating set of big houses in New York and an ever-expanding array of small presses across the country. These writers and their readers are ill-served by a culture that treats their books merely as props for selfies or potential gift items. They deserve critics who can deliver painstaking appraisals within a tradition of lost and found books that itself requires the constant work of rediscovery. For better or worse, the best tool we have for this work is the book review.

3.

In December, *Columbia Journalism Review* published an item by Sam Eichner under the headline "What's Behind a Recent Rise in Books Coverage?" The answer was a quest for web traffic. The editors Eichner quoted celebrated the bright new modes. There would be more recommendations. There would be more rankings. There would be more online book clubs. Instagram would be harnessed. There would still be criticism but fewer "traditional" reviews. Readers want to be served in the way fans are served. Books should be treated in the manner of movies or television shows, as occasions for collective chatter, as storehouses of shareable trivia, and once in a while as containers of detachable ideas. The overall vision was that of literary journalism as a form of

higher publicity. In keeping with that spirit (the spirit of the flack), Eichner channeled his interviewees—editors from the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, *BuzzFeed*, and *The Atlantic*, touting their own publications, trying to justify their editorial decisions and keep their jobs—and explained the recent rise in books coverage:

In some ways, mainstream book coverage is coming down from its historically lofty perch to join the rest of arts coverage, catering less to the intelligentsia and more to the casual reader, who may not be interested in literary fiction or nonfiction. With so much to watch and read and listen to—and so many people chiming in on what to watch and read and listen to—it's no surprise readers are hungering for a trusted source who can point them in the direction of books tailored to their interests. And those same readers may be looking for the kind of full-court, blogosphere press typically reserved for watercooler shows like *Sharp Objects* and meme machines like *A Star Is Born*.

Here a consumerist vision of reading is presented as a form of anti-elitism. The quaint use of "intelligentsia" suggests a suspect class of self-regarding intellectuals with an echo of Cold War red-baiting. And then a fantastic fictional character: the casual reader who disdains literary books but is eager for, say, the *New York Times* to tell her which nonliterary books to read when she isn't busy watching HBO or listening to podcasts. And what does "full-court, blogosphere press" describe but hastily written, barely edited, cheap, and utterly disposable online jetsam? Such is the nature of the new "books coverage." I was aware of the trend. Two months before Eichner's story ran, my contract to review books at *New York* magazine was dropped. I had been told that although its books coverage would be expanding, what I did—book reviews—had "little value."

4.

One of the hazards of this approach, if not its broader pointlessness from an intellectual standpoint, became apparent a few weeks later. *The New York Times Book Review's* By the Book column is a weekly feature in which a prominent author answers a set of boil-

erplate questions about her reading habits. It has high trivia value. The author typically has a book to promote, and the *Times* gets free content from a famous person (who may not be famous as an author, but it's the fame that's the point). In the By the Book column of December 16, Alice Walker, the seventy-five-year-old author of *The Color Purple* and a new book of poetry, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart*, said that one of the books on her nightstand was *And the Truth Shall Set You Free* by David Icke, a fringe figure in his native Britain but a known trafficker in anti-Semitic conspiracies involving sinister reptilian aliens who control the world. "In Icke's books there is the whole of existence, on this planet and several others, to think about," Walker wrote. "A curious person's dream come true." In that Walker had previously enthused about Icke's writing on her blog and had a history of anti-Semitic statements, this wasn't exactly news. But the online magazine *Tablet* took the *Times* to task for publishing Walker's recommendation "unchallenged."

On December 18, the *Times* published an interview with its chief books editor, Pamela Paul. She explained that By the Book is an email questionnaire sent to its subjects and edited only for space and factual accuracy but not for its subjective content. "Readers have certainly learned something about the author and her tastes and opinions," Paul said of Walker. "I think it's worthwhile information for them to know." Perhaps it is, but that had never seemed to be the point of the By the Book column in the past. The point was never scrutiny. The point was a transaction of fame for publicity.

5.

Why do book reviews exist?

We know that books have historically been treated as news and as objects for evaluation. We know that publishers might want to advertise in the vicinity of book reviews, though by most accounts book reviews in newspapers have been unprofitable in modern memory. We might add that books are

something many writers are eager to write about, often for only modest fees. But there is another reason that book reviews have persisted for centuries: *nobody has ever figured out a better way to write about new books.*

The book review is and always has been an unsatisfying form. In its newspaper iteration, it is a text of somewhere around a thousand words tasked with summarizing, contextualizing, analyzing, and evaluating a work likely more than fifty times as long. The wrongs a



reviewer can commit within this space are many; clichés are pandemic. In reviews of a novel or a work of narrative non-fiction a dreary formula persists: prolix yet cursory summary topped with a smattering of more or less irrelevant biographical information yielding to polite and generic adjectives of praise (compelling, engrossing, charming) before a dip into enthusiasm-draining caveats placed into the penultimate paragraph to prove that the critic is, you know, a critic, and at last a kind conclusion to make sure we're all still friends and no one's time has been entirely wasted. A critic I know used to call this sort of review "the shit sandwich." The pan

can be as dubious a form: the reviewer scolding an author for not writing a book she never dreamed of writing, slapping a conventional novelist with the Kafka stick, crucifying the celebrated writer for the sins of her admirers. By comparison, heaping praise and over-rating books is usually a matter of acquiescing to publishers' presentation of their products: publicity materials exist to be recycled by reviewers.

Literary criticism is ancient but book reviews became pervasive only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What Andrew O'Hagan has called the Age of Reviews began after the death of Samuel Johnson in 1784. The *Edinburgh Review*, the most often cited precursor of modern literary journals, was founded in 1802. "A crowd of literary men found employment in writing about books rather than in writing them," Stopford A. Brooke writes in *English Literature AD 670 to AD 1832*, "and the literature of Criticism became a power." This power was instantly corrupting. On these shores, in his 1846 series of broadsides, "The Literati of New York City," Edgar Allan Poe aimed to elucidate "the distinction between the popular 'opinion' of the merits of contemporary authors and that held and expressed of them in private literary society." "Quacks" inflated their own reputations through networking campaigns that a genius would never resort to, which was why

a genius like Nathaniel Hawthorne was little known and poor. "We place on paper without hesitation a tissue of flatteries, to which in society we could not give utterance, for our lives, without either blushing or laughing outright."

Complaints about reviewing have tended to focus on the quality and tone of evaluation. Occasionally there is a social component, writers being both hermits and herd animals. "The literary Rotarians," Dorothy Parker wrote in 1928, "have helped us and themselves along to the stage where it doesn't matter a damn what you write; where all writers are equal." In 1935, as Michelle Dean recounts in

her study of women critics, *Sharp*, Margaret Marshall and Mary McCarthy published a five-part series in *The Nation*, “Our Critics, Right or Wrong”: “The history of American criticism during the last ten years,” they wrote, “has been a history of inflations and deflations: the first, raucous, hyperbolic; the second, apologetic, face-saving, whispered.” If reviewing were held up to the criteria of science, it would have gotten things exactly wrong:

Criticism in America during the past ten years has on the whole worked for the misunderstanding of works of art and the debasement of taste. The tony critics as well as the hack book reviewers have contributed to this anarchy of standards.

Note that McCarthy and Marshall refer to a world in which the concept of “standards” is the crucial issue and misevaluation the primary offense. Two decades later, in 1959, Elizabeth Hardwick argued in these pages that the space between the poles of inflation and deflation had been filled by a “mush of concession,” a phrase she borrowed from Emerson:

Sweet, bland commendations fall everywhere upon the scene; a universal, if somewhat lobotomized, accommodation reigns. A book is born into a puddle of treacle; the brine of hostile criticism is only a memory.

Sixty years on, Hardwick’s essay, “The Decline of Book Reviewing” (excerpted on page 35), has taken on a legendary status. It’s said to have served as the founding manifesto of *The New York Review of Books*, which Hardwick helped start in 1963, along with her husband, Robert Lowell, Random House editor Jason Epstein, and the journal’s coeditors, Barbara Epstein and Robert B. Silvers, formerly Hardwick’s editor at *Harper’s Magazine*.

Fifteen years later, Hardwick’s crowd, the New York Intellectuals, had become the predominant force in criticism, in part through the influence of the *New York Review*. Echoing Poe, the critic Richard Kostelanetz blasted the scene for what he saw as its Mafia ethos and inattention to young talent in his 1974 diatribe *The End of Intelligent Writing*. One of his targets

was Philip Roth, whose fame, Kostelanetz argued, was the result of collusion by publishers and critics to hype Portnoy’s *Complaint* beyond its merits. Kostelanetz set out a vision of the literary power structure as layers of an onion, and named names. The same year, in a letter to the *New York Review*, Roth suggested that one of his critics, daily *Times* reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, be replaced by a nationwide contest among undergraduates. Such polemics and feuds are the signs of a healthy literary culture, a zone where the stakes are high even if the audience is small and may reside mostly in posterity.

ENDLESS LISTS OF RECOMMENDATIONS BLIGHT THE LANDSCAPE WITH SUPERLATIVES THAT ARE HARD TO BELIEVE

These arguments took place within a set of more or less stable institutions. The past two decades have been a phase of upheaval, panic, and collapse. The crisis of closures that has struck America’s regional newspapers hit their books pages first. Among publishers, authors, and critics there was much moaning and wailing, an understandable reaction given that these parties were losing valuable publicity if not their livelihoods. Having started out reviewing for the *Hartford Courant*, which no longer runs original reviews and only occasionally picks them up from the wires, I was sympathetic to this sentiment. But as these losses piled up, it was difficult to feel that something wonderful had been lost, even if it had real value in swaths of the country that were losing many things all at once. What mattered most were the big city papers, especially the *New York Times* and, as Hardwick wrote, “all those high-school English teachers, those faithful librarians and booksellers, those trusting suburbanites, those bright young men and women in the provinces, all those who believe in the judgment of the *Times* and who need its direction.” When the *Times Book Review* was listless, it started to resemble “a provincial literary journal, longer and thicker,

but not much different in the end from all those small-town Sunday ‘Book Pages.’” As Steve Wasserman, editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* from 1996 to 2005, wrote in *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2007:

Book coverage is not only meager but shockingly mediocre. The pabulum that passes for most reviews is an insult to the intelligence of most readers. One is tempted to say, perversely, that its disappearance from the pages of America’s newspapers is arguably cause for celebration.

It might have been, if a renewal had followed collapse, and for a while it seemed one would.

That decade saw the rise of the book blogger. The early book bloggers—typically amateurs, many of whom have gone on to become authors and critics for mainstream outlets, among them Mark Athitakis, Maud Newton, Mark Sarvas, Levi Stahl, Tao Lin—were an anarchic bunch, pursuing their own idiosyncratic enthusiasms and antagonisms (Sam Tanenhaus, then editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, was a frequent target of their ire, envy, and, occasionally, awe). Constricted neither by convention nor by editors, the bloggers, at their best, popularized worthy but obscure writers, circulated the most interesting criticism that caught their eyes, and devoted tremendous energy to indexing the literary scene. They were passionate. At their worst, they aired uninformed opinions about books they hadn’t read, but mostly their work was a tonic. Group blogs such as *The Millions* (recently purchased by *Publishers Weekly*), *Electric Literature*, and *HTMLGIANT* became forums for recent MFA graduates and geographically isolated aspiring writers to work out their ideas in public and form their own communities. As with blogs generally, book blogs entered a decline as social media became the zone where people ventured their considered or (increasingly) stray thoughts. But the DNA of the book blogs survived as literary institutions began pouring their resources into their online manifestations. *The Paris Review Daily*, *NewYorker.com*, and this magazine—which for a time ran an excellent blog, *Sentences*, by the critic

Wyatt Mason—absorbed some of the modes of the book blog. Literary Hub, a venture largely funded by the publishing industry, preserves the style of the book blog while also serving as a clearinghouse for book excerpts, personal essays, and even fiction, which has rarely been a popular form online. In 2013, *BuzzFeed* entered the books space with a declared policy of running only positive coverage. “Why waste breath talking smack about something?” its books editor, Isaac Fitzgerald, told *Poynter*. “You see it in so many old media-type places, the scathing takedown rip.”

I met Fitzgerald around that time at a party, and I’m fond of him. His pro-book policies seemed harmless, and when *BuzzFeed* went out of its way to crown a book, as it did with Alexandra Kleeman’s 2015 novel *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, he and his team did so with an eye for hip new talent that would appeal to their presumably youthful audience. But it seemed to me that by ruling out the negative and becoming in essence a cheerleader for certain books, *BuzzFeed* had embraced a formula of literary irrelevance by disavowing a spirit of disputation. Who cares what you think if your every word is a compliment?

About fifteen years ago, as happens from time to time, there was a movement in the literary world against “snark” and toward a new niceness. Dave Eggers, author and publisher of *McSweeney’s*, spoke of wanting to send a message to younger people that “books are good, that reading is good ... and that anyone pissing in the very small and fragile ecosystem that is the literary world is mucking it up for everyone.” I don’t think that negative reviews, even snarky ones, are toxic in the way that Eggers characterized them, nor do I think the new books coverage is toxic. If we run with Eggers’s ecosystem metaphor, the new books coverage is more like litter. Endless lists of recommendations blight the landscape with superlatives that are hard to believe, especially, as is inevitable, when they aren’t drawn from the work of critics but compiled by poorly paid writers who haven’t read the books they’re recommending, a standard practice in preview lists. Proliferating recommendations become what Hardwick called “a hidden dissuader, gently, blandly, respectfully denying whatever

vivacious interest there might be in books or in literary matters generally.” Readers are better served by the algorithm, which never pretends to have an actual opinion.

6.

What is the difference between television and literature?

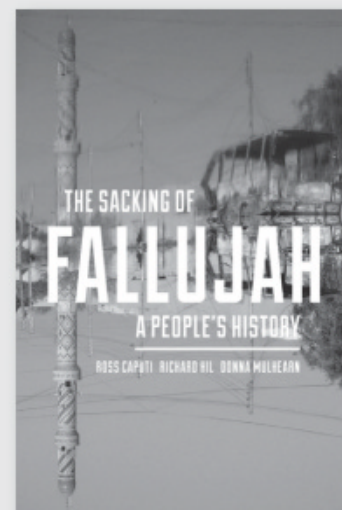
In his 1980 *New Yorker* essay on the rise of television culture, “Within the Context of No Context,” George W. S. Trow made a distinction between “the grid of intimacy,” that is, the grid of social life—and the place where books are read, a grid of author and reader—and “the grid of two hundred million,” a zone of common experience, roughly the size of the US population at the time, engendered by television. What Trow called “the Aesthetic of the Hit” was something like “love,” which television sought to create in its viewers to keep them watching:

The love engendered by familiarity. False love is the Aesthetic of the Hit. What is loved is a hit. What is a hit is loved. The back-and-forth of this establishes a context. It seems powerful. What could be more powerful? The love of tens of millions of people. It’s a Hit! Love it! It’s a Hit. It loves you because you love it because it’s a Hit! This is a powerful context, with a most powerful momentum. But what? It stops in a second. The way love can stop, but quicker. It’s not love. There is a distance so great between the lovers that no contact is ever made that is not an abstract contact.

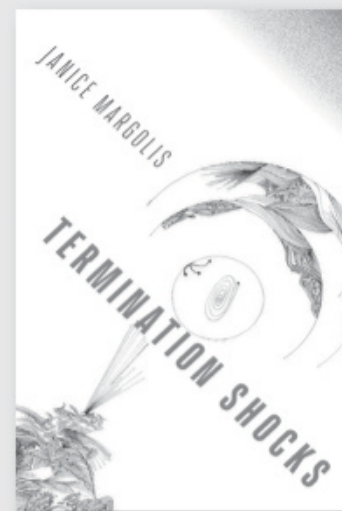
The internet collapsed this distance, not between television’s creators and its viewers but among the viewers themselves. Now viewers can discuss TV shows as they are being broadcast, introducing a new grid of mass quasi-intimacy between viewers in their living rooms and the program on the tube. This new grid emerges nightly on Twitter, which instantly transforms into such a forum whenever a popular program comes on. It also partakes of a genre native to the internet: the TV recap.

Why would someone who watched a television show on a Sunday night want to read a summary of it on Monday morning? I’ve often been puzzled by this question. Episode by episode, television

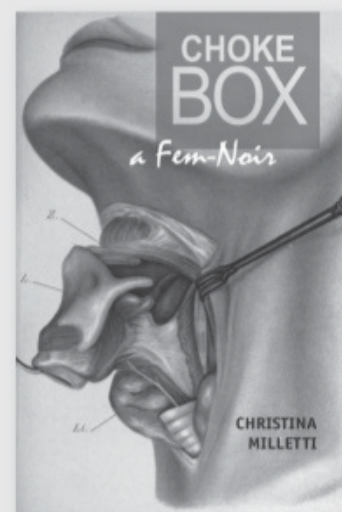
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doesn't require much in the way of interpretation. Any program that did would be too recondite to stay on the air, the work of David Lynch being a glorious exception. But the TV recap has become a popular form because it extends the love between program and viewers. The love is still false.

7.

Forty years ago, Trow could be confident that he was writing to an audience that disdained television even if his readers watched more of it than they would have liked to admit. Too much time spent in front of the tube was discussed as a national epidemic and a plague on the nation's children. Three or four generations have now grown up watching television, and sometime in the first decade of this century, the stigma of loving television too much evaporated. The canary in the coal mine of the new reverence for television was, of course, *The Sopranos*, at once a supremely satisfying work of entertainment and the most over-rated cultural artifact of our time. It's true that by the going standards of television, *The Sopranos* offered superior acting, combining professionals and strikingly real-looking amateurs, and superior writing and production values. Packed with constant (and obvious) allusions to classic Hollywood cinema, it combined pulp and melodrama around a simple moral quandary: Could Tony Soprano, head of a crime organization and a psychotic murderer, still, as a loving if philandering husband and father, be considered "a good man"? The show did its own work of interpretation in the endless, and increasingly tedious, therapy sessions that passed for its novel twist on the mobster genre, even though they weren't particularly novel. Subtext was eliminated. You might think this would render further commentary superfluous. In practice, it just made it easier, right down to the vacuous question of whether Tony was whacked in the show's final scene. Interpretation became a form of transcription, the recap a bridge between the grid of intimacy and the grid of two hundred million.

A thousand recaps bloomed. It became customary for outlets like *Slate* to publish online discussions of episodes the day after they aired. The practice of

recapping spread to ever more venues, including the *New York Times*, and to ever less sophisticated programs. The journalists who engaged in it seemed to have finally found a way to combine their two favorite activities—watching television and doing their homework. That the television shows were perfectly comprehensible and didn't require much actual exegesis didn't matter, because people clicked anyway. Enjoying television, once something considered slothful, became a respectable activity among the chattering classes, and one could hear a sigh of relief. It was the sound of the meritocracy letting itself off the intellectual hook.

MODELING BOOKS COVERAGE ON THAT OF TELEVISION WILL ALIENATE ITS ONLY VIABLE AUDIENCE: PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN BOOKS

"Those of us who love TV have won the war," the *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum wrote in 2015. "The best scripted shows are regarded as significant art—debated, revered, denounced. TV showrunners are embraced as heroes and role models, even philosophers." It's understandable that critics should want to act as boosters of the medium they criticize, especially in the case of television where even in the age of streaming, a program's failure to gain an audience will result in cancellation. But in the case of television the result has been a pervasive overinflation. "Left to their own devices," Kyle Paoletta recently wrote in *The Baffler*,

our most prominent television critics seem solely interested in defining the best and the greatest, as determined by increasingly esoteric criteria. Such parlor room conversations would all be in good fun, were their effervescent tone not so clearly impairing the ability of the critics to view their subject with even a modicum of distance or restraint.

That tone is spilling over into the rest of the arts, where the transformation of business models or perennially gloomy surveys—purporting to show

a general decline in, say, reading—create a false sense of imperilment.

Bringing books coverage "down from its historically lofty perch," modeling it on coverage of television, and emphasizing human interest in authors will alienate its only viable audience: people who are interested in books. No book in the short term will ever have the audience of any single TV show. TV critics occasionally make claims for "scripted television's raiding of literature," as Matt Zoller Seitz of *New York* has: voice-over narration, occasionally unreliable; chapterlike episodes; multiple perspectives; a distinctive voice. What complicates a work of entertainment is basic to a work of literature. Readers of book reviews are often reading about a book not only as potential readers of that book but to partake of an intellectual world that constantly scrutinizes more books than any one person could ever read. Often the attraction is the writing in the criticism. Profiles can have similar effects if written in the spirit of appreciative criticism. But writers are not famous like actors, and shouldn't be under the burden of being as interesting as their books, and the authors of the most interesting books never will be. Most Q&As with young authors simply bend their idiom to a coded language of salesmanship. Pity them in their pantomime of likability.

8.

In an environment where "sweet, bland commendations" have become the norm, Hardwick's essay still has lessons to teach us. "Simple 'coverage' seems to have won out over the drama of opinion," she writes.

"Readability," a cozy little word, has taken the place of the old-fashioned requirement of a good, clear prose style, which is something else. All differences of excellence, of position, of form are blurred by the slumberous acceptance.

But Hardwick was describing a failure of critics. Today it's criticism itself that has been deemed insufficient because reviews aren't engines for traffic. "In the past," Pamela Paul told *CJR*,

when a book came into the *Book Review*, the question we would ask is, "Does this book deserve to be reviewed? Should we review this?" ... Now the question is, "Does this book deserve

coverage? And if so, what does that look like?"

But if a book doesn't merit a review, why cover it at all?

The edifice of "books coverage" that has been constructed around the work of critics looks a lot like the coverage of television—a tissue of lists, recommendations, profiles, Q&As, online book clubs, lifestyle features, and self-promotional essays by authors of new books—an edifice so slapdash it could be blown away in a week. And if the house collapsed, nobody would miss it.

9.

A typical issue of *The New York Times Book Review* contains about a dozen full-length book reviews, plus several capsule reviews. By its very nature, it's the sort of publication that will be entirely satisfying to no one if it's doing its job right: appealing to readers of different political persuasions and varied tastes while assuming a certain baseline of literacy. Meanwhile, the paper's three daily critics write at least once a week (they are three of the best working anywhere). By a low estimate, that's about seven hundred and fifty book reviews a year. So what's the problem?

When new imperatives emerge, familiar things have a way of suddenly disappearing. In his 1999 book *My Pilgrim's Progress: Media Studies, 1950–1998*, Trow wrote:

The *New York Times* today is seeking to know its reader's mind. Its reader's mind is now a mystery, and the *New York Times* is terrified that the mind of the generation growing up now—the generation that will someday replace its current readers—is a complete mystery.

In the two decades that have passed since Trow ventured that diagnosis, the mystery and the terror have only become more acute. Traffic seemed to be one answer to the mystery, but in many contexts traffic has proven to be an unreliable narrator, a fairweather friend, or an outright fraud. The most infamous case has been the widely touted "pivot to video" led by Facebook, whose declared emphasis on video led many media companies to

redirect their resources to camera-ready content while shedding writing staff. When Facebook pivoted away from video a short time later to emphasize its users' personal content in its news feed, it turned out these investments were made in vain, and a few fledgling media companies that had made the pivot were shuttered, auctioned off, or, in the case of *BuzzFeed*, laid off hundreds of staffers.

In 2014, the *New York Times* produced an internal innovation report. The report was quickly leaked, and since then its lessons have been widely summarized as "become more like *BuzzFeed*." It's not an unreasonable summary, but it's simpler to look at the text of the report itself. A section under the heading "De-emphasize Print" includes these three imperatives:

—Shift the newsroom's center of gravity away from Page One. Creating additional measures of success, using metrics like traffic, sharing and engagement could help.

—Ask our editors to read more like our readers. Each desk should have at least one staff member monitoring its report on the mobile web, and on our mobile and tablet apps. Eventually this will become second nature.

—Make digital a key part of evaluations. Reviews should include sections for digital as well as print performance. This should be the case for the whole newsroom, particularly for leaders. Has their desk developed a smart strategy for social media? Are they open and enthusiastic about experimenting? Are they making smart, digitally focused hires? To do this, we must first communicate digital expectations to our employees.

Something the report doesn't say is that for certain types of journalism the quest for traffic is incompatible with, if not antithetical to, the task at hand. Once a critic has decided, or been assigned, to review a book, should any questions of attracting traffic figure into the work of analysis and evaluation? If they do, such concerns will inevitably push the reviewer to declare the book either a masterpiece or a travesty, or to point up its most sensational elements if there are any to speak of. A conscientious review admitting either to ambivalence or judgments in conflict with one another won't travel as quickly on social media as an unqualified rave.

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As *BuzzFeed* books editor Arianna Rebolini put it to *CJR*'s Eichner, "Are you going to put your time into something that's not going to share well?"

I began writing this essay in December, at the height of the season of "Best of 2018" lists. Between their dual function as year-end honors and holiday shopping guides, such lists will always be with us. In the *Times*, they've achieved a sort of mania. Beyond its standard "100 Notable Books of 2018" and "The 10 Best Books of 2018," there was an "Off the Book Lists" set of recommendations from *Times* staffers of books that didn't make the "Notables" list. If so many deserving books were left off, then why not expand the "Notables" list to one hundred and twenty? Next came a set of recommendations from the authors on the "Best Books" list. The new year brought no respite from lists. What is the utility—to anyone—of an item like "Hot Books for Cold Days," published by the *Times* on January 18 and consisting, after a one-sentence introduction ("As the mercury plunges, you could pile on extra sweaters, huddle beneath an afghan, drink hot tea—or you could get lost in a book that will transport you to sunny, sweaty places"), of short, undistinguished quotations from nine very popular books (including Stephen King's *Cujo*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*) to the effect that it's hot outside in the summertime?

In its pursuit of traffic or its spirit of experimentation or its efforts to make its editors read like its readers, the *Times* seems to have lost its sense of its audience's intelligence. How else to explain an item like "How to Tap Your Inner Reader" by Gregory Cowles, an editor of the *Book Review*? A tag attached to the article reads: "This is part of 'A Year of Living Better,' a monthly series of how-to guides for subscribers that will help you improve your life, community and world." Cowles, a fine critic on occasion (and my editor on my single contribution to the *Book Review*), takes to his task without condescension, though I can't imagine (having been asked to write a few shopping guides myself) he enjoyed it: "Finding time to read generally means *making* time to read, and that means making it a priority." Indeed. The self-help approach is apparent in another regular *Times* feature, Match

Book, an advice column that answers letters from readers seeking specific book recommendations (What should members of my philanthropic society read? Can you recommend books about Maine? Fiction about music? Spiritual poetry?). As we know from spending any time on the internet, or from Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*—the classic American newspaper advice columnist novel—the world is full of desperate people. Who knew they were so desperate for book recommendations? Aren't those easy to come by in any bookstore or on Amazon?

10.

When it's not busy making recommendations—duplicating the efforts of pervasive algorithms, albeit with the air of a human touch—the *Times*' books coverage is anti-intellectual in more traditional ways. "You're organizing a literary dinner party," says the *Times* to recipients of its By the Book questionnaire. "Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?" The presumption that reading is best experienced as a polite, middle-class affair and not a solitary activity is a different form of the flight from scrutiny. The *Times* has always been afflicted by what Gary Indiana called a "worship of conventional success and its symbols," and this creates a problem when it covers authors, because compared with an actual celebrity or a Hollywood showrunner, an author's success will always be marginal. If the first question to be asked about an author is, How did you make it? quite likely the answer is the author wrote books that Amazon put at the top of its list of recommendations. Another *Times* column, Cover Stories, examines the packaging of books as if the packaging were the thing itself.

In December, an article in the *Times* ran online under the headline "Late-Night TV Hosts Give Publicity-Starved Novelists the Star Treatment." Here are the modes of the *Times*' literary imaginary: the way novelists wish they were treated (as stars) and what they crave (publicity). Seth Meyers, over the course of five years, has welcomed "a few dozen" literary authors as guests on *Late Night*, "many of them far from household names," and this has given him and the like-minded *Daily Show* host Trevor

Noah "an enormous amount of influence in the publishing world." Watching Meyers interview an author for four to six minutes, you get the sense that he might have read his guest's book, or at least skimmed it closely enough to get a sense of what it's about and where and when it's set. Surely, as the *Times* reports, authors can expect a spike in sales and interest in their books, but the point of these interviews seems to be the burnishing of the image of the host. You can trust these comedian-intellectuals to interpret the news for you. They even read books!

"To get authors back into the mix says this is not esoteric stuff, this is part of pop culture," the novelist Rebecca Makkai told the *Times* of her appearance on *Late Night*. And who could begrudge an author her six and a half minutes of fame, even if the potential of any novel truly to enter pop culture, unless it's adapted for the screen, is slim to nil? The American novelists who counted as celebrities and appeared occasionally on television—Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Philip Roth—are all dead. So is David Foster Wallace. The elders—Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon—are covetous of their privacy. Jonathan Franzen is the nearest thing to a going celebrity in American literature. A *Times Magazine* profile, "Jonathan Franzen Is Fine With All of It," by Taffy Brodesser-Akner, appeared on July 1, 2018, a few months in advance of his new collection of essays, *The End of the End of the Earth*. Once upon a time, Franzen balked at going on television and accepting Oprah Winfrey's imprimatur. It wasn't the highbrow thing to do. Seventeen years later, he has become the literary embodiment of the *Times*' television and digital anxieties: What does success mean if it doesn't happen on a screen? The profile treats Franzen's novels as an afterthought, his new essays as a peg, and his devotion to bird-watching as a personality quirk. In the *Times*' crosshairs he is a walking internet meme and a failed television writer.

A showrunner for Franzen's adaptation of his 2015 novel *Purity* calls to tell him the project is off. Star Daniel Craig calls to apologize to the author for abandoning the project to make the next James Bond film. Poor Franzen:

the 2012 HBO adaptation of *The Corrections* also fell through. Will he ever win? In the absence of Oprah's Book Club, sales of his novels have fallen from the low seven figures to the low six figures. Boo-hoo. Nor can he win online, where,

though critics loved him and he had a devoted readership, others were using the very mechanisms and platforms that he warned against (like the internet in general and social media in specific) to ridicule him.

Well, it's true that Franzen is often ridiculed on the internet and that his literary success hasn't translated to Hollywood, but those are two of the least interesting things about him. "Gratuitous haters don't want to read a whole book," Brodessa-Akner writes. "Most of the people who have complaints with me aren't reading me," Franzen tells her. In fact, Franzen has plenty of critics who've read him very carefully and argued about his books on formal, thematic, and political grounds, but you wouldn't know that from this profile. Good news, however, arrives in the end. Showtime calls, and the *Purity* adaptation might be back on, in "capsule" form, whatever that is. Franzen is also working on a new novel, which, he declares, will be his last. Now there's a scoop.

11.

At the end of his life, after he'd stopped writing, Philip Roth made a habit of talking about the impending death of the novel, which was sure to transpire within a couple of decades of his own. Screens were sapping the public's attention. "There was never a Golden Age of Serious Reading in America," he told *Le Monde* in 2013, "but I don't remember ever in my lifetime the situation being as sad for books—with all the steady focus and uninterrupted concentration they require—as it is today. And it will be worse tomorrow and even worse the day after. My prediction is that in thirty years, if not sooner, there will be just as many people reading serious fiction in America as now read Latin poetry." Franzen, for his part, says he's turned to Hollywood because ours is "an age when the novel is in retreat and people are looking for reasons not to have to read a book."

No adult needs a reason not to read a book, and novelists are always fretting about the status of their vocation. I don't need to convince myself that we're living in a Golden Age of Serious Fiction to keep writing about it. I wouldn't say we are in a time, to paraphrase the TV critics, of Peak Novel, but with a new generation just arriving, why should we pretend to be? The novel is a durable form no matter how many times its death has been declared. Hollywood is chasing after writers of books as at no time since the 1930s. They are content's ground zero, for better and worse. The effects this will have on our literature will be the task of critics to chart. Book reviews are the front lines of culture and politics, where ideas are tested before they harden into dogma in the mouths of pundits. As Hardwick wrote, they are the zone where "the unusual, the difficult, the lengthy, the intransigent, and above all, the interesting, should expect to find their audience."

12.

Now let's think of Wendy and Alex in a different way, as the sort of people I know to exist. You probably know them too. You might be a lot like them.

Wendy and Alex have never stopped reading since they were children. Reading books, watching films, looking at art—these are simply things they would never not do, whatever stage they are in their lives, however much money they do or don't have. They know how to find out about what they might like and what they might not like, whether this information arrives in their mailbox or their inbox or through one of their feeds (which feature as many strangers discussing Marcel Proust or Clarice Lispector or the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* as they do media outlets). Neither Wendy nor Alex thinks much about the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, but they can tell good writing from dull writing. Good writing casts a spell, but spells can be hard to find. They know the names of critics and love the clang and clack and click of minds you hear in a well-wrought piece of criticism. They're attracted to disputation and to esoteric books. They too never have enough time, but they're not too concerned about wasting it. They like to figure things out for themselves. ■



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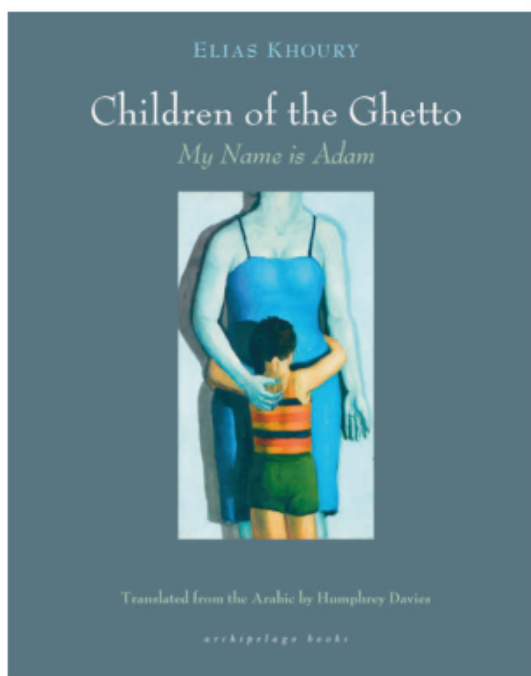
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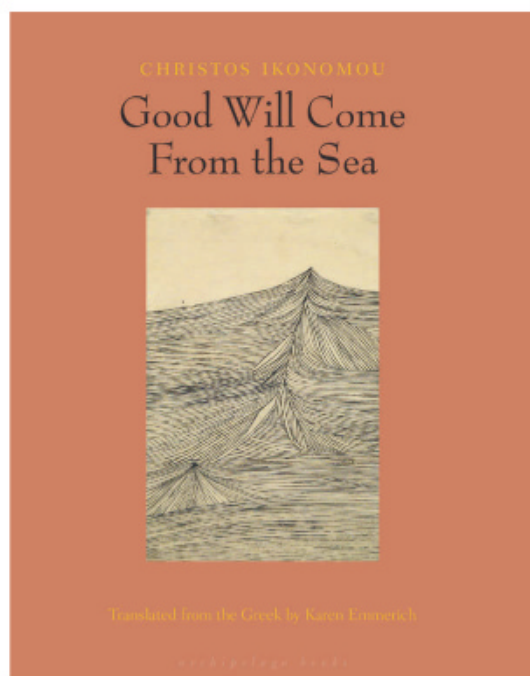
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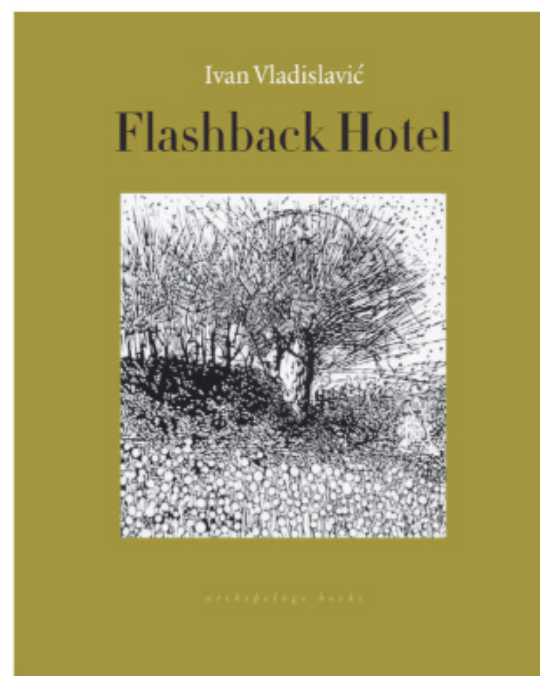
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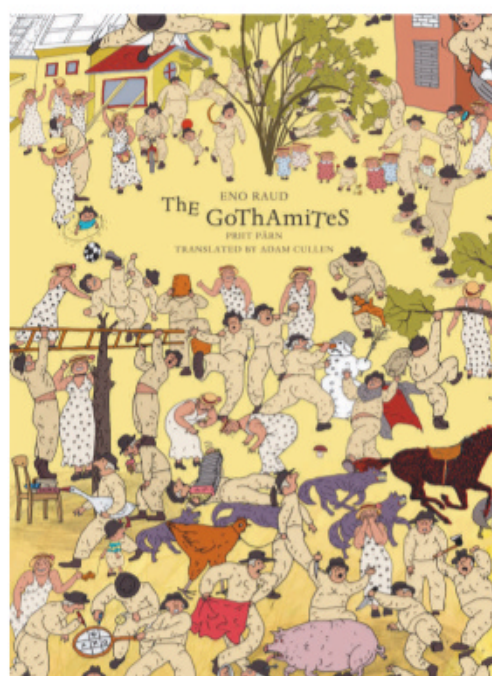
Ivan Vladislavić occupies a place all of his own in the South African literary landscape: a versatile stylist and formal innovator whose work is nevertheless firmly rooted in contemporary urban life.

— J.M. Coetzee



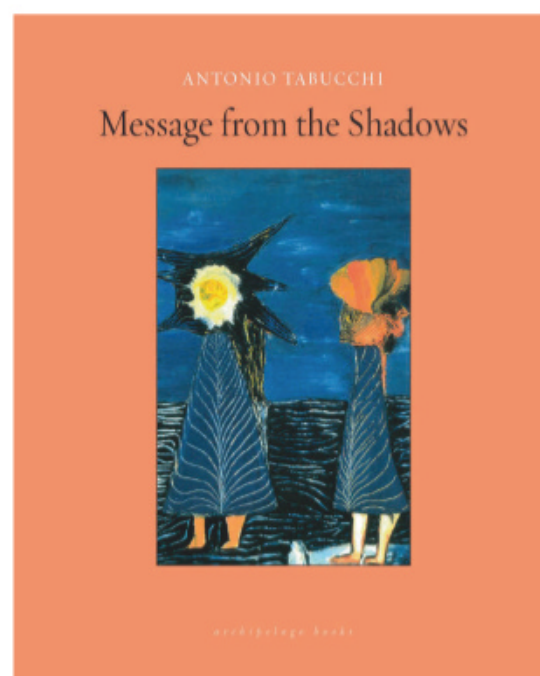
A Change of Time is a book of masterful restraint, and this restraint is a kind of tenderness. It is a book that understands that desire permeates everything . . . that sometimes love clings most inextricably to the smallest places – misjudgment, invisibility, loneliness.

— Anne Michaels



Fantastic things change into usual, the supernatural is described as the most natural; and everyday life is turned into an extraordinary and interesting fancy world . . . Yes, that is the way of the author: to give thrilling adventures, nothing but thrilling adventures.

— Andres Jaaksoo



Tabucchi's prose creates a deep, heart-wrenching nostalgia and constantly evokes the pain of recognizing the speed of life's passing which everyone knows but few have the strength to accept . . . wonderfully thought-provoking and beautiful.

— Alan Cheuse, NPR's *All Things Considered*



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LITERARY FAILURE

By Elizabeth Hardwick

There used to be the notion that Keats was killed by a bad review, that in despair and hopelessness he turned his back to the wall and gave up the struggle against tuberculosis. Later evidence has shown that Keats took his hostile reviews with a considerably more manly calm than we were taught in school, and yet the image of the young, rare talent cut down by venomous reviewers remains firmly fixed in the public mind.

The reviewer and critic are still thought of as persons of dangerous acerbity, fickle demons, cruel to youth and blind to new work, bent upon turning the literate public away from freshness and importance out of jealousy, mean conservatism, or whatever. Poor Keats were he living today might suffer a literary death, but it would not be from attack; instead he might choke on what Emerson called a “mush of concession.” In America, now, oblivion, literary failure, obscurity, neglect—all the great moments of artistic tragedy and misunderstanding—still occur, but the natural conditions for the occurrence are in a curious state of camouflage, like those decorating ideas in which wood is painted to look like paper and paper to look like wood. A genius may indeed go to his grave unread, but he will hardly have gone to it unpraised. Sweet, bland commendations fall everywhere upon the scene; a universal, if somewhat lobotomized, accommodation reigns. A book is born into a puddle of trea-

cle; the brine of hostile criticism is only a memory. Everyone is found to have “filled a need,” and is to be “thanked” for something and to be excused for “minor faults in an otherwise excellent work.” “A thoroughly mature artist” appears many times a week and often daily; many are the bringers of those “messages the Free World will ignore at its peril.”



"This is a great book and you are a great writer. I am your follower!"

The truth is, one imagines, that the publishers—seeing their best and their least products received with a uniform equanimity—must be aware that the drama of the book world is being slowly, painlessly killed. Everything is somehow alike, whether it be a routine work of history by a respectable academic, a group of platitudes from the Pentagon, a volume of verse, a work of radical ideas, a work of conservative ideas. Simple “coverage” seems to have won out over the drama of opinion; “readability,” a cozy little word, has taken the place of the old-fashioned requirement of a good, clear prose style,

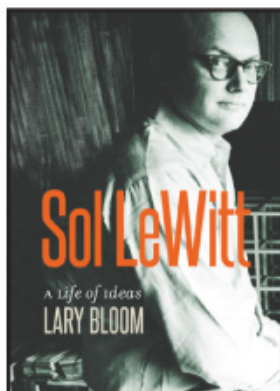
which is something else. All differences of excellence, of position, of form are blurred by the slumberous acceptance. The blur erases good and bad alike, the conventional and the odd, so that it finally appears that the author, like the reviewer, really does not have a position. The reviewer’s grace falls upon the rich and the poor alike; a work that is going to be a bestseller, in which the publishers have sunk their fortune, is commended only at greater length than the book from which the publishers hardly expect to break even. In this fashion there is a sort of democratic euphoria that may do the light book a service but will hardly meet the needs of a serious work. When a book is rebuked, the rebuke is usually nothing more than a quick little jab with the needle, administered in the midst of therapeutic compliments.

The editors of the reviewing publications no longer seem to be engaged in literature. Books pile up, out they go, and in comes the review. Many distinguished minds give their names to various long and short articles in the *New York Times*, *Herald Tribune*, and *Saturday Review*. The wares offered by the better writers are apt, frequently, to be something less than their best. Having awakened to so many gloomy Sundays, they accept their assignments in a cooperative spirit and return a “readable” piece, nothing much, of course. ■

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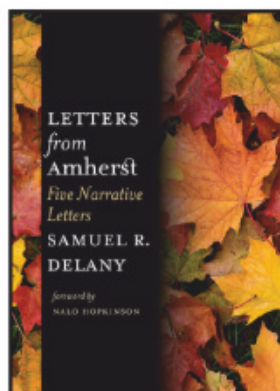
From “The Decline of Book Reviewing,” which appeared in the October 1959 issue of Harper’s Magazine. The complete essay—along with the magazine’s entire 168-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.

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Lary Bloom

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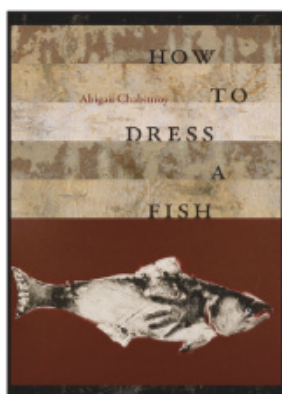
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Samuel R. Delany

Five substantial letters written from 1989 to 1991 bring readers into conversation with a Hugo and Nebula Award winning author



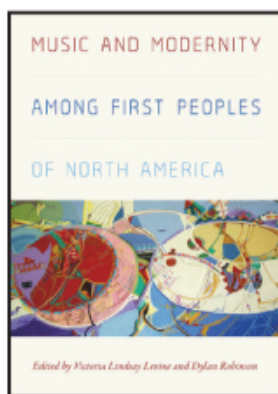
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Abigail Chabitnoy

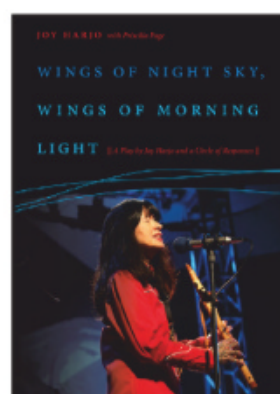
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among First Peoples of North America

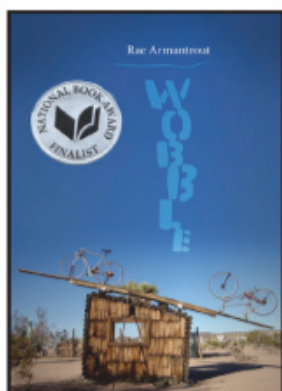
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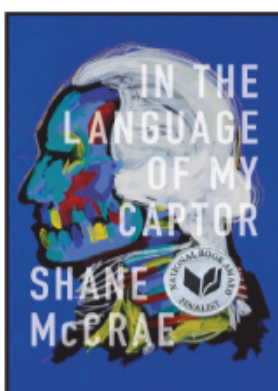
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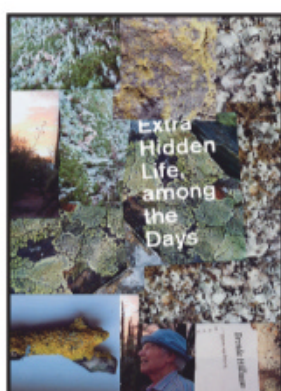
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WHISPERINGS

A writer alone with the work

By David Means

Once, in an exuberant state, feeling filled with the muse, I told another writer: When I write, I know everything. Everything about the characters? she asked. No, I said, everything about the world, the universe. Every. Fucking. Thing. I was being preposterous, of course, but I was also trying to explain the feeling I got, deep inside writing a first draft, that I was listening and receiving, listening some more and receiving, from a place that was far enough away from my daily life, from all of my reading, from everything.

Writers speak to themselves, whispering assurances, forming aesthetic alliances, imagined fellowships with others, with God, with community, with the past, with whatever, trying to sustain the will to continue to imagine, working through aspects of their own personality, gauging the outside culture, all in an attempt to build a scaffolding to hold up the work. Sometimes, writers go out into the world with their ideas—as I’m doing here—and always, at least as I see it, there is some residue of that scaffolding, framing their ideas as a way to frame and hold up the work they have created, trying their best to build the case for their own creation. Sometimes it works. Other times it proves a detriment. The work is the work, I have often told myself—and it was in that whispery, assuring voice, usually on some lonely afternoon, staring at the keyboard or at the pen and paper. The power of my imagination is enough right now, I said,

and I still say, to myself, and, anyway, if the story is strong enough nothing else should matter. It’ll get out there, maybe, in some form, and it will touch someone.

Fannery O’Connor’s *A Prayer Journal*, a small book of notes written to herself—beautiful and pious and serious and, yes, sometimes egotistical—carries the sound of a writer whispering to herself, and to me, that she has to live up to the obligations of the work itself. “I want very

David Means is the author of a novel, Hystopia, and five story collections, most recently Instructions for a Funeral.

AS A STORY WRITER, I FELT
MYSELF A MEMBER OF A
COLLEGIAL ORDER OF THOSE
WHO HAD DEDICATED THEIR
LIVES TO THE FORM

much to succeed in the world with what I want to do," she tells God. In one entry, she says, "But I do not mean to be clever although I do mean to be clever on 2nd thought and like to be clever & want to be considered so." Here is a writer whispering to her God and to herself, expressing the paradox of the inner creative voice, of someone who wants complete candor and honesty in her work but also longs, somehow, to be seen, to be read, to be thought clever. Later, she says to God, "How hard it is to keep any one intention[,] any one attitude toward a piece of work[,] any one tone[,] any one anything." The profound, destabilizing nature of trying to be creative, keeping one foot inside your own faith, personality, beliefs, political concerns, and identity while the other foot, or perhaps I should say the writing hand, ranges wide and far, beyond the self, into the imagined world where anything and everything can and must happen. How else did this devout soul create the Misfit, the monster whose gunshots in the tree line destroy an entire family one by one? How else—except by writing through faith and doubt—could she imagine her way into the

Y Misfit and his perversely profound comment, "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life"?

ears ago, a fellow writer and I sat across from each other at a table, and a vibration seemed to pass between us—perhaps I just imagined it—of mutual exhaustion and anticipation. With his wonderfully antic and expansive, visionary and humane tales, he had established an eminent place for himself in the literary world. I was known, too, as a short-story writer, but not widely. Between us—and we only sat a short while that morning, sipping coffee—the weird, unspoken vibration continued until I said, nervously, something about my unfinished novel. "I'm trying to write a novel," I might've said, or, "I feel the pressure of the novel," and he said, "I'm doing the same," or, "I feel the same." It was heartening to hear a fellow writer speak of the pressure to write in a longer form. It's a feeling Alice Munro expressed in one of her rare interviews, admitting that even with all her accolades she still felt, on occasion, guilty about not having written a proper novel.

Over the years I struck up a written correspondence with Don DeLillo, a writer I greatly admire, someone who has written many of the best sentences of his generation, an elder statesman of the novel form who is admirably relentless in his vision as a writer. I wrote him long letters and I'd be thrilled to get back postcards with just a few words, or sometimes, longer responses. One time, when I wrote him a rambling, self-pitying note bemoaning the fact that I hadn't yet been able to finish a novel, he wrote one of his characteristically brief but poignantly supportive typed notes that told me, in so many words, that the novel took sustained effort—superhuman focus—and a lot of time before it revealed what it was trying to do. I read between the lines. I was a person with very little time—and mouths to feed—and perhaps I should just keep writing stories. As a story writer I felt myself a member of a collegial order of fellow writers, those who, for the most part, had dedicated their lives to the form: Anton Chekhov, my hero; Raymond Carver, another hero in some ways; Munro, the very center, for me, of the possibilities of what the form could do with time; Katherine Mansfield, who carved words into rocklike, pure formations; Lucia Berlin, a more recent hero; Lorrie Moore, who has written a few novels but seems ultimately a pure story writer; Lydia Davis, with her perfect narrative nuggets; Franz Kafka, who wrote a few brilliant yet unfinished novels but had night visions that purified themselves into the story form; Frank O'Connor, who wrote one of my favorites, "The Bridal Night," a totally neglected story that brings tears to my eyes and charges me with a desire to go in deeper; George Saunders, although if I'm honest about it, envy enters into my regard for him. These writers seemed part of a much larger literary world—and they were—but they were the holdouts, the ones who built reputations on the short-story form, and they kept me company for years as I wrote story after story.

Eventually I wrote a novel about war—about the Vietnam War—in a slightly twisted alternative past as imagined by a slightly twisted young man, Eugene Allen, named in part after my grandfather. The novel was the result of years haunted by the sense of *do or die*; to become known as a writer, and to do what I had to do as a writer, to fully reveal my creative vision, I must write the novel. But I also felt that I was betraying that part of myself that had assured me that I was first and foremost a short-story writer. I justified my self-betrayal and told myself that by writing a novel I

would be drawing some readers to my stories, perhaps at the cost of breaking, for a while at least, my sense of being one with those I loved so much, my fellow story writers.

For ten years, I was an at-home father, alone with my twins while my wife, Genève, worked during the day—starting when they were around one—taking care of them day in and day out, cleaning their faces, changing their clothes, feeding them, playing on the floor, braiding hair, combing hair, taking them on playdates. I’ve kept this part of my life to myself until now—hours at the playground, with other parents, often all mothers, and, later, picking the twins up from school.

Those years, I taught at a community college at night. I remember one class, in Haverstraw, New York: English as a Second Language; working folks who cared deeply about becoming educated and read with devout attention and good humor. I taught them Samuel Beckett: We read *Krapp’s Last Tape* and watched a film version. They connected with it. At the end of the semester, they pooled resources and bought me a gift certificate to the local mall. We wept together. Year in and year out, I taught classes on everything *but* creative writing: literature by women, one semester; another, modern fiction. One student, a Vietnam vet—chopper gunner—became a nurse and now works in White Plains. Another, then a teenage mother, became a school administrator in Westchester.

Being a caregiver and a community college professor taught me the humility necessary to continue; it taught me to focus on the duty, on the crayon marks, on the lunches that needed to be packed, on the doctor’s appointments made, on the needs of working people. Hour after hour of caring for children, living vicariously (in a dangerous way) through their successes and failures, was costly and sometimes terrifyingly lonely, but it was also gratifying. I felt a part of a large network of mostly women who cared for one another, who sustained one another—trading tidbits of advice, gossip, spotting one another when there was an emergency, negotiating playdates, going on school trips.

Those days fed into my work. Quietly, to myself, I said, the river that feeds the stories has the same source; the lives of my characters come from the same energy: they too once waddled around a playground, or were held, or not held, as they cried to sleep, and they have been betrayed somehow, damaged, torn up along the way. But the creative aspect, the confrontation with the primal nature of caring for children—and twins at that—taught me, again, the humility and grace of giving in to time itself. Once, I read in a childcare book that the love you give your babies will eventually come back in the end, and I took that to heart because it applies to creative work, to the stories. You might not see it, though.

MY NOVEL WAS THE RESULT
OF YEARS HAUNTED BY THE
SENSE OF DO OR DIE; TO FULLY
REVEAL MY CREATIVE VISION I
MUST WRITE THE NOVEL



IF READERS THOUGHT MY
STORIES TOO DARK, I WOULD
REPLY: WHAT COUNTRY
DO YOU LIVE IN?

In one of his stories, “August 25, 1983,” Borges describes a character named Borges signing in at a hotel and noticing that he has already signed in, that another character—himself—has been there ahead of him, not a doppelgänger—that would be uncharacteristically simple—but a form of himself in the future. I’ve had this feeling upon finishing a story; that some other Means was ahead of me, checking in to the hotel, writing a story, and handing it over to me with my own name on the title page. With the novel, I didn’t feel that sensation: with the novel the person on the title page was the person who wrote the novel. It was heavy and, in revision, had to be retooled. It was worked piecemeal and couldn’t be held in my brain in its entirety. With a story, I feel I can rotate it like a jeweler staring through a loupe.

I turned to Isaac Babel and Chekhov, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, Mansfield, Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Bernhard, John Edgar Wideman, Kafka, Langston Hughes, Bob Dylan, Thomas Hardy, Tom Waits, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Flannery and Frank O’Connor for inspiration, whispering to myself: *You’ve got to go to the source.* I read deeply into Native American folklore. I read history. I read poetry. I reread the Bible. I read Abraham Joshua Heschel. I studied Sufi dervish tales. I searched for a sense of form.

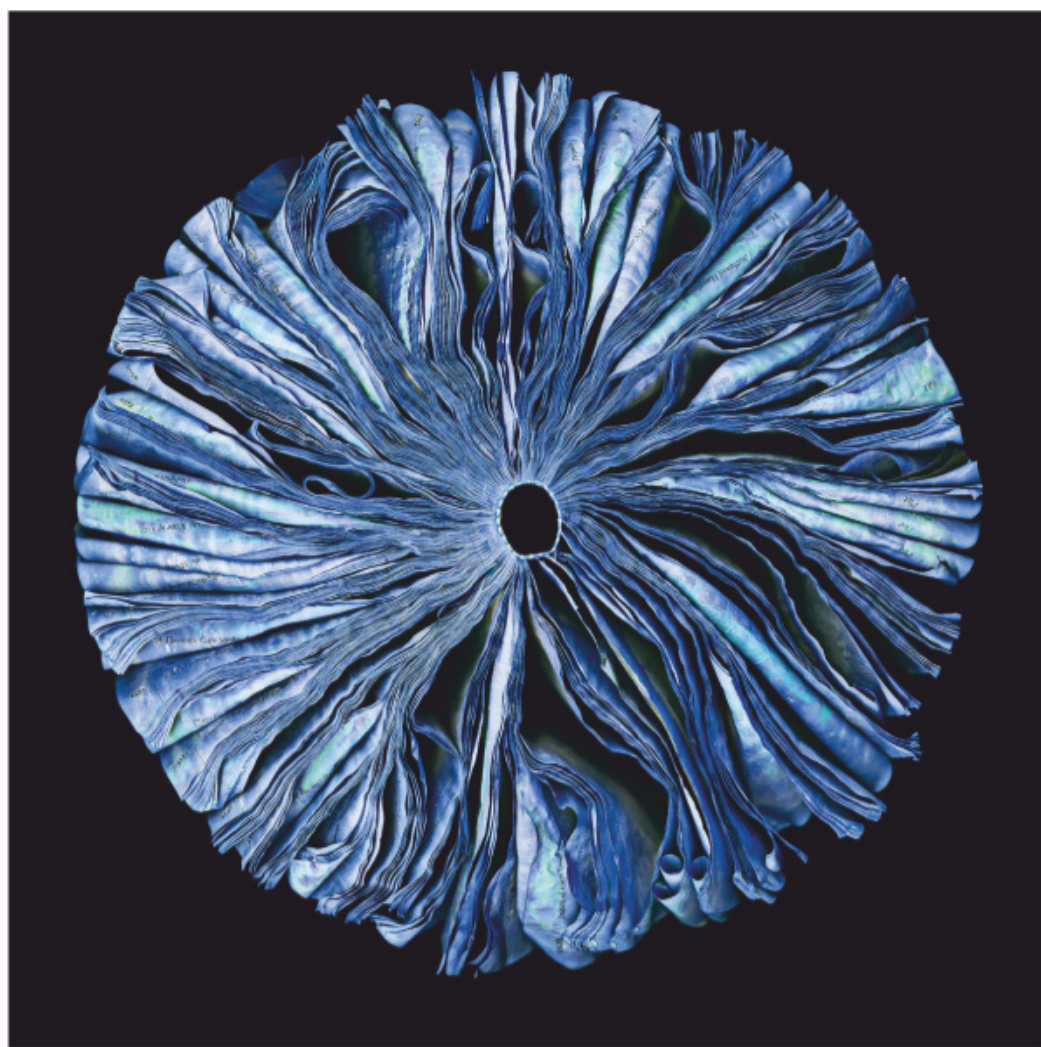
These writers, and others, floated and orbited and were part of my whispered reveries, but at the center, I have to say, if I’m going to be completely honest here, was my own vision, my own way of working, and what felt, when things were good, when I had done all of the work and revision, to be a sense that the story was completely true to itself and to my own tradition. That might sound grand—in this self-effacing age of false humility, when nobody is supposed to speak of internal grandness—but when I was working, alongside, in my imagination, my fellow short-story writers—William Trevor, for a few years—I had to feel, somehow, that I could pull it off. I was building a body of work that would be about the violence and isolation and desolation and joy and grief and grace that I had seen, in my own life, in my own way.

I’m revealing a personal physics. But I believe that every good writer has to whisper words of encouragement that, when exposed to the public, would sound delusional. When you diminish the power of the imagination to make visionary

work—Woolf creating Septimus Warren Smith, or William Faulkner entering Benjy-time, or Toni Morrison creating Milkman in *Song of Solomon*—when you question the ability and validity of one soul, any soul, to inhabit honestly created characters, do you diminish, in the public mind, respect for the power of the imagination?

At times, I heard a critical voice that said, Who are you to write about two homeless men on the shore of Lake Superior scratching a lottery ticket? Have you been homeless? What do you know? And I wanted to counter by saying: no, but I’ve been on the shore of Superior, alone, and I have family members who have been homeless, and I’ve dragged garbage bags of clothing from one halfway house to another, and I’ve felt the sorrow involved.

If readers thought my stories too dark, or too violent, then I would reply, quietly, in that assuring voice that only I could hear: What country do you live in? Have you ever had a sister like mine? Or a brother? Have you



seen people destroyed? Have you watched a dying uncle smoke a cigarette in the hospital, twisting off the oxygen cylinder with the Seattle gloom outside, the cancer eating his gay beatnik lungs? Have you sat for lunch in the East Village with a friend dying of AIDS, and listened to him laugh at death and then, in a rage, shout at someone who was staring, *I've got AIDS, motherfucker*? Have you prayed in a small Irish church, some ruins in Cork, with the sky overhead?

But here's the thing, the twist. If I say publicly what I whisper to myself, as I've done here, I actually diminish something, lose something, not only as a writer but as a reader. The writer's duty is to instruct, first oneself, and in turn the reader, how to envision the vision: suddenly we're near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, up in the foothills, walking the grassy berm that was once a part of the dam that, when it broke, caused a catastrophic flood; we're there with someone else, another character, and we're going through what is now a national park, looking down into the bowl-shaped valley filled with weeds and full-grown trees where the water once sat on a rainy night, May 1889, waiting to plunge the fourteen miles down the valley toward the town. We imagine this couple, on a sunny summer day, with the sound of cicadas in the trees, and we spell it out for ourselves—and our readers—and a story begins to unfold. As long as there are exactly enough words, in the right tone, and as long as there is some kind of active movement, the reader fills the rest. The reader sees it all. It is the reader's valley, the reader's trees, the reader's berm.

Each story is born of a completely different admixture, a combination of my dream life at the moment, my concerns, and the demands of the story itself, not only the characters in a particular situation, but also the internal structure and language and voice. Sometimes I'll carry a draft around for months, maybe even, in some cases, years, and go back to it again and again, not only with revisions but also just looking at it, holding it, and this process is—and this is something I whisper to myself—expensive. What I do, I say, is extremely expensive. Working this way, using up so much time for such a small form, is costly, I say to myself. This might be one of those grand things a writer whispers, but I think, when I think of my colleagues in the form—Babel riding with the Red Cavalry and suffering death at the hands of Stalin's thugs; Chekhov writing story after story as he supported his extended family; Munro up there in Canada, at her desk by the window, waiting and waiting and listening and then revising—that the cost of the form is part of its appeal. Munro wrote her first several books in the busy confines of her life as a mother, catching stories and bits of time the way I did. Grace Paley wrote amid her political activism, a busy life in the streets of New York. You can feel it around a story writer's creations; these small missives of narrative with a void around them, the empty space at the end of the story and the infinite space before the first words appear: the sense that each short story was created out of an impulse much stronger, sharper, more intense than the drawn-out impulse behind a novel.

Years ago, I wrote down, on a sheet of paper that has since been tacked to my work-space wall, an artist credo of sorts, ideas on how I should work, commands to myself that, from time to time, I refer to when I'm in despair, or stuck. Most of these I keep to myself with all the selfishness that seems necessary to protect my own artistic spirit. One aspect of being a writer that is seldom discussed in these openmouthed days, that might look shameful, is that a writer, any good writer, does indeed have what seem to be trade secrets that help sustain the hard work. In his essay "A Word to the Wise Guy," Burroughs, coming off a gig teaching creative writing, asked, "And am I being punished by the Muses for impiety and gross indiscretion in revealing the secrets to a totally unreceptive audience?"

THE WRITER'S DUTY IS TO
INSTRUCT, FIRST ONESELF,
AND IN TURN THE READER,
HOW TO ENVISION

ONE OF MY CREDOS IS TO
LET A STORY TAKE AS LONG
AS IT NEEDS TO TAKE, EVEN
IF IT TAKES FOREVER

Burroughs's fear—as he was suffering a post-teaching writer's block—is revelatory, not only because, yes, most writers are aware of the Muses, of the submerged, often delicate source of inspiration, but because they are also aware—or should be if they aren't—that when they give out their tips on how writing works, grant interviews about their own process, they are usually doing so to a somewhat unreceptive audience. There's only a limited supply of writers who might understand, or find useful, your own process, and some things should be held as secrets because, most likely, they are unique to your own sense of how things work.

How did you make all those leaps in a single story? Where do you get your ideas? What ideas, I say. An idea isn't a story. A blind man leaning into a cane on a busy street, looking forlorn as he waits for traffic to abate. The side of a supertanker docked in Cleveland in the hot sun, once a proud seaworthy vessel, now a ragtag museum. A white man confronting a homeless African-American man in a train station somewhere between Chicago and Detroit. A baby clutching life in the ICU. (I've seen all of these things.)

Truth is, for about ten years, I never once looked at that list of credos. But it was there on the wall.

When I was in college my father sent me Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*. One of the best bits of advice came from a section titled "Integrity":

Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their individual lives. They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint.... They wear out their minds and bodies in a hopeless endeavor to have somebody else's experiences or write somebody else's poems.... Hurry ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity.

You must become receptive to the imagination—call it the muse, call it inspiration, call it the artist within, it doesn't matter. It might take time. It might take years. If you're honest, it might never happen.

One of my credos is to let a story take as long as it needs to take, as many revisions as it needs, even if it takes a hundred, even if it takes forever, and I think this is a good one to abide by if you're doing something in a form that is relentless, that can fail with just one wrong move, that, like poetry, is limited in some strange way by its own structure and shape, by the nature—for lack of a proper word—of the infinite open space around it. Grandly, with ego, I sometimes honor myself—no one else will do it—for keeping a story at bay, for letting it sit, lonely and abandoned in a file, a physical file, while I move on and my subconscious does the work. Hemingway had that practice of holding off on a piece, stopping in the middle of a good line until the next day, and perhaps it is a little bit like that, except lasting months. The writer who best described this was Andre Dubus, who, in a late essay, called his new way of writing "vertical writing"; he wrote down into the story—he claimed—and followed the character "home." He put aside writing horizontally, from point A to B, and began, he said, to go down into it vertically.

Literary form is often misunderstood. The form of something is created within the work, as part of the process, and you discover it as you write. A quote that I've lived with for a long time comes from Gerhard Richter, an artist I admire because he works both in abstraction and in what might be

called photo-realism. He moves between two completely different modes and in doing so proves a point: an artist can work in many voices—the fucked-up junkie or lost hobo in the Depression and the lonely widow in her mansion along the Hudson River. You can go anywhere. Richter, in a *New York Times* interview, said something that I broke up into a found poem:

What I Learned from
Gerhard Richter

Form is all we have
to help us cope
with fundamentally chaotic
facts and assaults.
Formulating something
is a great start.
I trust form,
trust my feeling
or capacity
to find the right form
for something.
Even if that is only by being
well organized.
That too is form.

The organizing principle around a story, the container that creates the form, is the limitation, the open space at the beginning and at the end; the sense that the entire thing must take a form—the text—with eternal open space before and afterward. Everything must resonate within this space. That’s what I say to myself, at least, when I’m trying to revise, to find a way to make something work. The best you can do is to organize—and this includes the lyrical resonance of the language and images—inside the limited space as best you can—I whisper to myself—and cut it off, end the thing, in a way that resonates out toward both sides of the story.

Even to me this sounds like mumbo jumbo, but that’s the kind of thinking that goes on when you’re creating something. At some point you’ve got to commit yourself totally to the reality of the form, to the inherent limitations, cut the line to let the fish swim away forever. Beckett once said, “The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent.” That’s a quote I live with. To plan ahead is not the way to go, I think, and that includes research. I’d rather go into the story and then, later, backtrack and find the facts to correct, or to leave alone.

“Fail better,” Beckett also said. Sometimes I’m not so sure that’s helpful for younger writers to hear. Find an edge where you feel you have succeeded, might be better advice to the beginner. But know that it’s a fake edge, something that you, too, created. On the other hand, Beckett is right.

I believe in the functionality, the pull, the yearning, the force of narrative. It can be small, fragmented, but it has to pull. Inside Maggie Nelson’s wonderfully explorative book *The Argonauts* are many stories—and just when

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we grow tired of the academic, of the analytic, we are pulled back into story: Is she going to have a baby? What will happen to her when she has a baby?

Protect the fuel pellets, I whisper. Delineate the line between the losses you have suffered, the pain, and the narratives that you might find by using them as fuel. Once, years ago, when I went to visit my sister in the state mental hospital, a monstrosity at the time, a huge complex with old towers and ivy-covered brick, I took a video camera, thinking: I'll record all this and use it somehow. I didn't. Instead I searched out—swinging a

net wide—for stories of the kind of men who hung around her in our youth: brutal young men who keyed into a teenage girl with exploitable instability.

Baldwin, in his essay “The Creative Process”:

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone. That all men *are*, when the chips are down, alone, is a banality—a banality because it is very frequently stated, but very rarely, on the evidence, believed.... The state of being alone is not meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake. The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearful aloneness that one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help. Or it is like the alone-

ness of love, the force and mystery that so many have extolled and so many have cursed, but which no one has ever understood or ever really been able to control.

We sit at a bar nursing drinks with friends and telling one another stories. Sometimes we go into polemic, but mostly we tell stories. We don't tell novels, or essays. We speak, we reach out to each other, with stories.

A reader reads and imagines—if instructed properly—a barn and a pig and a spider. These are 90 percent the reader's barn, her spider, her pig. Years later, reading the book again to her little boy, she sees basically the same barn, the same pig, and the same spider, who happens to be writing words in her web.

By its very nature, if you're writing a memoir and you aren't famous, an object of prefabricated interest, you must make yourself interesting to your readers, and often you do so by amplifying the drama of your specific experience (unless your story somehow clicks in with the interest of the larger public, in which case whatever you write will be of momentary concern). Fiction, though, must be interested in *itself*, must instruct in a precise but unique way on how to see, and must leave room for the reader's imaginative capacity to rethink after the fact.

Forget education, I whisper. Educational fiction, or what I call edufiction—fiction meant mainly to inform, to act as a kind of travelogue for the middle-class reader—is of use, but only for so long. On the other hand, to go into a fictive dream, into a world I do not know, and to feel fully part of the imaginative experience; to draw from my own sense of parenthood while watching a mother decide the fate of her child; or to be with a woman who is locked into her particular historical moment, ordering her boy out of the cellar while an insane white woman upstairs calls for a hot-water bottle—I'll take it. Give me anything but a sense that I'm being educated.

I'm not sure that teaching empathy is the project of fiction, either. Does it put the cart ahead of the horse to say it is so? An uncompassionate person reading Kafka would simply give up. One is under no obligation to read the work. One has no obligation to work through *To the Lighthouse*, or *Corregidora*, or *The Brothers Karamazov*. The compassionate reader moves ahead. Certain stories yield to compassion with ease—whereas others move us to the edge, leave us there. Too much is demanded of the reader—moving with the instructions given, having to imagine. Reading,

like anything, is a skill. We never stop learning to read—I assure myself, my students. On the other hand, maybe I’m wrong. Perhaps a slightly empathetic young person—with just a twinge of feeling for the Thou—finding the right fiction would be yearned into other text. Maybe I’m totally wrong.

Inherent in all shoptalk about writing, inherent in the questions that are just different ways of asking “How do I get published?” is a sense on the part of the student that there is some magical key, some single, precise bit of advice that will unlock everything. All of those how-to books on writing, all of those seminars, the vast Writing-Industrial Complex stretching from coast to coast. Programs. Festivals. Retreats. The pretense of professionalism: take art, a lonely, abject, incredibly hard thing—a gift in the deeper form, as described by Lewis Hyde, something passed on to other people and not meant as some kind of exchange but meant to be passed forward to someone else—and turn it into a profession, a lineup of résumé-ticking points, from panels to teaching gigs to award juries. Why puncture this dream by questioning it? I whisper to myself.

Many writers I admire—from Saunders to Nelson to Danielle Evans—work, or have worked, inside the Complex, and many writers, myself included, teach creative writing at the undergraduate level. My students at Vassar are testing the waters, not looking for the key that will magically unlock their professional futures. When I’ve read manuscripts submitted for university writing prizes, I’ve often found that many of the undergraduate submissions were stronger than the graduate work. They weren’t as polished, but that’s what made them strong; they lacked the industrial sheen and took greater risks.

Perhaps I’m a type. I like to believe that my work has nothing at all to do with the world of academia, or that of pedagogy, or prompts, and comes out of something—I whisper—much deeper, more profound, and more connected with the lonely, hapless souls, the lost, the weary, the troubled, the fucked-up, the disconnected who, like certain people in my life, didn’t draw a card that said: I’m gonna be in a story, part of some larger product of someone’s process.

The rules that I make, the regulations, are going to emerge out of my own situation, my own needs, and therefore, because they are true within the confines of the work, can never be foreseen, and, man, the voice whispers, if a creative-writing class is anything, it is *anticipation* of the foibles of future works—advice is, inherently, given *ahead* of action, even if it seems to be in the context of something already done, as in revision. No, even advice on revisions is still an attempt at prophecy, and the magic of creation is that it takes place within the imagination, unforeseen, a surprise.

We need to bring the word *Muse* back into the lexicon, to respect the fact that, since antiquity, we have searched for a way to articulate in words what is, essentially, a mystery. Each writer has a particular list of inspirations, and I realize that many also have external voices that accompany them along the path toward creation—and for some the external support might be more necessary. But at the edge of creation, alone at the keyboard, no matter how many voices you have accompanying you, there is that moment, before you begin to hear the story in your head, before you push the key and create the word, when you are alone with your own voice and vision and work. It centers in on your imagination, on what you’re seeing, on what you’re envisioning, and, without it, the magic mimetic thing that fiction does, giving the reader precise instructions on how to see, doesn’t happen. I can attest to this because, years ago, I held my babies in a hospital and looked into their eyes and felt the already-told story of how that feels, the sensation of truth in the moment, and I do know that love is love no matter what boundaries it must cross. ■

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DESTINED FOR EXPORT

The troubled legacy of Guatemalan adoptions

By Rachel Nolan

Five years ago, Jean-Sebastien Hertsens Zune went looking for his parents. He already had one set, a Belgian church organist and his wife, who adopted him as a baby from Guatemala and later moved the family to France. But he wanted to find his birth mother and father. When Zune was a teenager, his Belgian parents gave him his adoption file, holding back only receipts showing how much the process had cost. Most people pay little attention to their birth certificates, but for adoptees, these documents, along with notes about their relinquishment, tell an often patchy origin story.

The paperwork said that Zune's birth parents, Alfredo Gonzalo Cajas Barrios and Rebeca Natividad López Ramírez, lived in a small town near the Guatemalan border with Mexico. Alfredo had signed the consent form with

Rachel Nolan teaches history at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University. Her most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "Innocents," appeared in the October 2017 issue. Research for this article was supported by the Fulbright Program, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies.



his name. Rebeca had dipped her finger in ink and signed with a thumbprint. The reason given for relinquishment was that Zune had been born with a clubfoot and his birth parents could not afford medical treatment. But his adoptive parents told him that his foot had been fine when he arrived in Belgium as a baby. Why had Alfredo and Rebeca really given him up for adoption?

At the age of twenty-seven, Zune moved to Guatemala and rented an apartment in Antigua, the former colonial capital laid out at the foot of a dormant volcano, with another volcano throwing up smoke in the distance. The city is popular among foreigners because it is a cheap and picturesque place to learn Spanish, with sixteenth-century church ruins and bougainvillea climbing the sides of adobe homes. At night, big, chattering black birds called *zanates* settle into a single tree in the city's central park, and the gringos and Guatemalans gather to dance salsa clumsily. Zune took intensive Spanish classes in a tile-roofed house with a courtyard filled with flowers, and began to use his pre-adoption

name: Alberto.

By the time he arrived in Antigua, Zune had already led a roving life—working as a bricklayer, a pizza slinger, and an airport information officer in Bosnia, Italy, Poland, and France. He earned a master's degree in international business but hadn't found a way to use it. Zune has a restless energy that keeps him from staying in

one place for long. He speaks five languages, most with local slang and imperfect grammar because he picked them up by ear. Guatemalans looked at him strangely when he spoke Spanish with drawn-out, frenchified vowels. He looked like he could be local, but no one guessed that he was from Guatemala. "Brazil?" they would ask.

After two weeks in Antigua, Zune felt he spoke enough Spanish to communicate, and he set out for Catarina, the place listed in his adoption file as his birth parents' home. Catarina is a small town in the southwestern corner of the country, an area through which the migrant caravans recently crossed on their way to the United States. Zune convinced a new Guatemalan friend to accompany him by motorcycle on the eleven-hour trek.

The road to Catarina begins smoothly, rising from Antigua through pine forests where indigenous families carry firewood up mountain paths on their backs, with tumplines looped over their foreheads bearing the weight. Then it becomes dangerous, as trucks, cars, and motorcycles pass one another around blind curves. The worst offenders are the "chicken buses," worn-out American school buses painted in bright colors and repurposed as intercity transportation. As the road descends from the mountains into San Marcos, the pines give way to banana trees and the tropical heat of the border zone rises. Catarina is just a few streets crossed together in an area known for drug trafficking, where teenagers serve as lookouts for small-time narcos.

Before arriving, Zune had written to the Belgian Embassy, which put him in touch with a Belgian priest who had lived in the area for decades. The priest gave Zune the current address of his birth father, Alfredo, who was now married to another woman. At the address, Zune and his friend found a concrete-block house set back from the street. Alfredo, a slight man with an intense gaze, answered the door and welcomed them effusively, professing himself delighted to see Zune again. "I've always remembered you, my son," he said. "I never thought you would come back."

Alfredo invited Zune to stay at his home in Catarina for several days. At family meals, Alfredo introduced Zune as his son, not mentioning the adoption but simply saying, "He's a son who went away." Everyone assumed this meant that Zune was the product of an affair, which would not be at all unusual. Alfredo didn't want to talk much about the past, but he was curious about Zune's life. How long could he stay in Guatemala? What had his life in Europe been like? Did he make good money at his jobs there? Zune stumbled along in Spanish, and his friend did his best to translate and help smooth the encounter.

Zune reveled in a feeling of belonging. A photograph from this time shows Zune smiling shyly with his hands in his pockets in Alfredo's living room. Alfredo's wife, with a pinched smile, has her hand on Zune's shoulder.

At the end of his stay, Zune announced that he was going back to Antigua, but said he would return to visit often. Alfredo told him he was welcome anytime, but that it would be best not to seek out his birth mother. "She's a bad type of person," Alfredo told Zune, insinuating that she might even be involved with the narcos. "She won't want to see you." He would not say why.

Zune hadn't come all the way to Guatemala to meet only one of his parents. He returned to Catarina a few weeks later, alone on the chicken bus. Rebeca lived on a small ranch just outside town. Her house was large enough only for a bed; the rest of her belongings—a table, a wood-burning stove—were arrayed on the grass outside. Rebeca was home, and she invited Zune in. Here, finally, was his mother. His first thought was that she looked older than her years. "I was so happy," Zune recalled.

But Rebeca told him that there had been *un error*, a mistake. "I'm not your mother," she said. Zune's Spanish was not perfect. Maybe he had misunderstood. "Look, ma'am," he said, "you are in my adoption file. It says here that you are my mother." But Rebeca was insistent. "I only signed for you," she told him, "nothing more." A long time ago, she said, a powerful neigh-

bor had forced her to pretend to be Zune's mother. The neighbor brought her to a lawyer's office in Guatemala City, where she consented to Zune's adoption. She didn't know how to read or write, so she signed the papers with a thumbprint.

The neighbor who forced her to sign the paperwork was Alfredo Gonzalo Cajas Barrios. Rebeca told Zune that the man who was posing as his father was rumored to be a child trafficker. People in the area said he had earned money finding children for lawyers in Guatemala City who arranged international adoptions. His wife, whom Alberto had met, had been involved in the adoption business, too, as well as the illegal importation of cars from Mexico.

Rebeca was religious, and what she had done had always bothered her. She said she had no idea who Zune's parents were. She had only signed adoption papers that one time, but other women may have done it for Alfredo, too. She was very, very sorry. Alfredo had threatened that if she ever told anyone what she had done, terrible things would happen. She warned Zune to be careful.

Rebeca spoke spontaneously, and Zune was inclined to believe her. After thinking it over for several weeks, he decided to confront Alfredo. He took Alfredo's whole family out to Domino's Pizza at the shopping mall in Malacatán, a nearby town, and, in the food court, next to the ball pit for kids, Zune told Alfredo that he had met Rebeca and asked for the truth. Alfredo claimed that Rebeca was lying. They had been together for a short while, he said, and this really was Zune's family. If Rebeca claimed that he was not the father, "maybe she had been unfaithful," he suggested.

Zune, confused and unsettled, went back to Antigua. He started contacting adoptee support groups for help, and found that he was not alone in his predicament. He learned from lawyers working with a nonprofit organization that the adoption agency that had handled his case, Hacer Puente ("Make a Bridge"), was known to have placed children who were stolen from their birth parents

with French and Belgian couples in the 1980s. The agency no longer existed, but the father and daughter who ran it had been named in several lawsuits. Zune was convinced that Rebeca was telling the truth. But if he wasn't from Catarina, where *was* he from?

Zune had always believed that his birth parents gave him up voluntarily, but now he could not be sure. "I think about them out there, looking for me," he told me. "I just want to talk to my real mother for one second, to find out if she gave me up because she wanted to or because she had to." When the lawyers in Guatemala City asked him whether he wanted to open a criminal investigation into his adoption, he said yes.

Zune is one of tens of thousands of Guatemalan children who were adopted abroad over the past several decades. Between 1996 and 2008 in particular, Guatemala, a small country of 17 million people, was one of the world's top sources of adoptive children for families in the United States. "Some countries export bananas," a Guatemalan congressman told *The Economist* in 2016. "We exported babies." Regulations were exceedingly lax, and it has now become clear that some of those babies were trafficked, and many others had their files falsified to speed up the process. Some children were stolen outright, often from poor, indigenous women in rural areas. A small number were abducted by nurses, who told the mothers that their babies had died in childbirth. In many cases, adoption lawyers working with foreign agencies paid women to coerce mothers into relinquishing their children. Guatemala began prohibiting foreigners from adopting in 2008, and thousands of families there have begun piecing together what happened and searching for their lost children. Zune is part of a wave of adult adoptees who are now returning to Gua-

temala to face disconcerting revelations about their pasts.

Adoptions from Guatemala began to rise during the country's civil war, a conflict that was stoked by the United States. In 1954, the CIA backed a military coup overthrowing Guatemala's democratically elected government, which had passed land reforms curtailing the United Fruit Company's semi-feudal control over the countryside. The coup resulted in a decades-long backlash. From 1960 to 1996, a small Marxist



insurgency squared off against a series of right-wing military dictatorships. A United Nations-backed truth commission later found that at least two hundred thousand people were killed in the war, the vast majority of them indigenous Maya. Soldiers, police, and death squads seized people by the light of day, hustling them into vans and later tossing their mutilated bodies onto the street as warnings. The United States supported the dictators with military equipment, which was re-routed through Israel when human rights abuses became too egregious for Congress to swallow. The generals

most infamous for torture and mass murder were trained at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, in Georgia. At the height of the killings, in 1982, Ronald Reagan flew down to Guatemala and said that the then dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt, was "a man of great personal integrity" and was getting "a bum rap."

Ríos Montt claimed that indigenous people in Guatemala were particularly susceptible to guerrilla influence, so scorched-earth campaigns against whole villages were necessary. "The guerrilla is the fish. The people are the sea," he proclaimed. "If you cannot catch the fish, you have to drain the sea." (Nearly all Guatemalans have Mayan heritage, but around 40 percent of the population is considered indigenous because they speak Mayan languages or wear traditional, hand-woven clothing.) Ríos Montt also happened to be a Pentecostal Christian, converted by a group based in California. He appeared on television every Sunday to give long sermons on the importance of family values even while he ordered massacres against indigenous villages, from which surviving children were stolen. One former social worker told me that, in the 1980s, the Guatemalan Army would bring staff from the Ministry of Social Welfare in helicopters to the sites of massacres to pick up the children. These

children were then held in state orphanages and put up for adoption, often with incomplete information about the identities of their birth parents or their places of origin.

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, signed in 1948, defines genocide as including not only massacres of ethnic groups but also "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." This is a little-known provision, though the tactic has been used often. Nazi Germany had a program called *Lebensborn* ("Font of Life") that identified and kidnapped

“racially pure” children throughout occupied Europe. The children were placed with “Aryan” families as part of the eugenic plan to germanize the continent. Nazi officials burned adoption files at the end of the war, so the extent of the program is unknown. From 1976 to 1983, during the Dirty War, Argentine Army officials stole an estimated five hundred children of “subversives” before murdering the parents and raising the children or assigning them to childless right-wing families. Francisco Franco’s fascist government in Spain also kidnapped thousands of children and gave them to families loyal to the regime. In Guatemala, the transfer of children was not the result of a top-down campaign, though it was an expression of extreme racism against indigenous people dating back to the Conquest. A 2010 report from the Guatemalan Archives of Peace found that the disappearance of children during the conflict was driven in part by the idea of “destroying the seeds of future guerrilla fighters.”

Wartime adoption files from the state orphanages appear to have been falsified in large and small ways, especially those concerning children “remitted” by soldiers and police. Some children’s names were changed and details about their pasts erased. Other files show that family members who came looking for the children were turned away if they didn’t have proof of kinship, such as a birth certificate, which many poor people in Guatemala lack.

But the vast majority of adoptees did not pass through the state orphanages. Using an infrastructure of lawyers, middlemen, and connections with foreign adoption agencies that was created during the chaos of war, the private sector built a thriving commercial market for adoptions. In 1977, the Guatemalan Congress voted to allow adoptions without judicial oversight; a private lawyer could match a child to a family, fill out all the paperwork, and get the process rubber-stamped by the attorney general’s office. (This system was unique in the world and accelerated Guatemala’s adoption boom; elsewhere, even the hastiest

and most slapdash adoptions were overseen by state agencies.) A private adoption was not cheap—it could cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$40,000—but it was fast. Adoptions through the state orphanages took about two years to finalize, but private adoptions could take as little as six months.

Adoption lawyers worked with women called *jaladoras*, literally “pullers,” who found children for a fee—usually several hundred US dollars per child. According to a study by human rights groups, *jaladoras* were often women between the ages of twenty and forty, the most valuable of whom lived in the same communities as their targets; many were poor and indigenous themselves. Some *jaladoras* stole children outright, but more often they would approach young mothers or pregnant women on buses or at outdoor markets and try to persuade them to give up their children. They would flip through photo albums showing Guatemalan boys and girls in the comfortable homes of middle-class families in the United States and Europe. *Jaladoras* would promise to cover the cost of childbirth in a hospital or to pay for medical care for other, older children.

Jaladoras became infamous for their guile and deceit. One strategy they used was to pretend to award scholarships to the children of illiterate, indigenous women in rural communities. The mothers signed what they thought were scholarship documents, but they were actually adoption consent forms. The children were taken to “school” and never heard from again. One woman in a tiny town called Aldea Güisiltepeque told me that she had been the only parent to sign up her child for a program providing free school supplies, because everyone else feared it would end with strangers taking the children out of the country. (In this case, the aid was real.) The woman turned to her young son, who was hanging around us listening, and said to him, in what I hoped was a joking tone, that he had better not go away with me or I would “turn him into soap.”

Because so many documents were falsified, it is impossible to know

what proportion of adoptions were illegal. Julio Prado, a former public prosecutor at the attorney general’s office who specialized in adoption cases, estimated that although the number of children kidnapped for adoption was very small, the majority of private adoptions were what he called “gray,” involving some form of coercion or fraud. When foreign adoptions were suspended, in 2008, the Guatemalan government ordered an investigation of the 3,342 adoption cases currently in process and found irregularities in more than half of them.

Zune had intended to stay in Guatemala for only a month, but he skipped his return flight to help with the criminal investigation. By the time I met him, he had been living there for two years. He had moved from Antigua to a less touristy neighboring town, Jocotenango, and decorated his new apartment with French and Guatemalan flags. When he invited me over, there was little food in the fridge and a lot of jarred protein powder stacked on top of it.

Zune is what Guatemalans call *desconfiado*, someone who doesn’t trust easily. Even before moving to Guatemala, he had an odd habit of secretly taping conversations. He showed me how he did it—by pressing the record button on his phone in his pocket without looking. At his apartment, Zune played me the recording of his confrontation with Alfredo at the mall. He had turned over copies to the Guatemalan attorney general’s office, and he had given a statement to the Belgian police, who were working with Interpol to investigate the adoptions handled by Hacer Puente. He was obsessed with the investigation, researching his case for hours each day.

Zune’s problem was not just that he didn’t know who his birth parents were, but that he didn’t even know what type of adoption his might have been. Was he one of the *niños de la guerra*? Had his mother been tricked or coerced? Was she even alive? Without the clues of language or dress, it was hard to say whether Zune was indigenous. Had he sur-

vived a massacre of which he had no memory? The only person who might know was Alfredo, and, for now at least, he wasn't telling.

Even once Zune was convinced that Alfredo was lying to him, he continued to visit Catarina. He grew attached to Rebeca and brought her little gifts, mostly food. Even if she wasn't his mother, he said, she had had the decency to tell him the truth. Alfredo was angry and hurt that Zune had gone looking for Rebeca, but he continued to treat him warmly, denying that he had done anything wrong. When Guatemalan investigators asked Zune to try to convince Alfredo to take a DNA test, Zune called him and said only, "I need to talk to you."

Several days later, Zune, accompanied by two public prosecutors, set out from Antigua early in the morning in a black car with tinted windows. Zune had arranged to meet Alfredo in the central park of Malacatán, but when Alfredo saw him step out of the official car, he started to back away. Zune motioned him over, and Alfredo didn't run. Zune explained that they were here to take him to the local health clinic to swab him for DNA. Alfredo didn't want to go, but one of the officials took him aside and spoke to him alone. "Somehow, he convinced him," Zune said. They drove Alfredo over to the health center. Alfredo was angry, and also somehow wistful. "I'm going to lose you," Alfredo told him before getting swabbed. The test was negative.

Zune's Belgian parents hadn't believed him at first when he told them that he might have been stolen or coerced away from his family. "They kept thinking that Alfredo was my father, that Rebeca was my mother, that everything had been legal," he told me. The DNA test finally persuaded them. They had known little about the civil war in Guatemala, but, as practicing Catholics, they had an idea that they might save a child from a desperate situation. The family had adopted a total of four children, each from a different country: Ethiopia, the Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Guatemala. Like many who adopted from Guatemala,

the couple did not know how children were selected and matched to families. They simply paid a lump sum to a lawyer for the adoption. None of Zune's siblings had any desire to find their birth families, nor had they returned to their countries of origin.

Zune's adoptive parents told him that one of the people who had facilitated his adoption was a tall, elegant Guatemalan woman named Ofelia Rosal de Gama. Rosal de Gama was the sister-in-law of General Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores, the president of Guatemala from 1983 to 1986. According to records at the National Police Archive, she had been arrested twice for "trafficking in children," once in 1983 and once in 1987. One mother, identified as Evelia R. in court documents, said that Rosal de Gama had approached her at a market in Guatemala City to ask whether she would be able to support the child she was expecting. Rosal de Gama gave the mother bread and tortillas, and eventually convinced her to give the baby up for adoption.

Rosal de Gama was named in one of the few pieces of investigative journalism published about international adoptions during the war, in *El Gráfico* in 1987, two years after Zune's adoption. The article was titled "Orphans of the Highlands: Spoils of War?" The highlands are a mountainous region in central Guatemala, where the indigenous population is concentrated. The story began,

The discovery by the national police of safe houses of children destined for export has permitted the revelation of one of the most painful facets of the dirty war staged in Guatemala over many years: the exploitation of orphans as a valuable byproduct bound to enrich the few.

Rosal de Gama appears as one of the women assisting Army officials to place children for adoption—channels that ran through both the private adoption system and state orphanages. Her participation in Zune's adoption suggested that perhaps he could be a war orphan or massacre survivor.

New York Revisited



Henry James

With an introduction by Lewis H. Lapham



New York Revisited

BY HENRY JAMES

First published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1906

With an introduction by
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Rosal de Gama was never convicted, but it is not clear whether she was released from jail for lack of evidence, under political pressure, or thanks to a bribe. The court records fall off without resolution. She died several years ago—never having served a prison sentence.

For many years, the US Embassy in Guatemala City was reluctant to acknowledge the problem of adoption fraud, despite the fact that it had granted tens of thousands of visas to children adopted by American parents. According to the journalist Erin Siegal McIntyre, who wrote the book *Finding Fernanda* about adoption fraud in Guatemala, the embassy was aware of problems as early as the late 1980s. Through FOIA requests, Siegal McIntyre found that in 1987 embassy officials learned of a private nursery in Guatemala City where children were sold to American couples for \$10,000 each. According to the embassy documents, the women who ran the nursery allegedly traveled to the country's rural interior to "steal children." The embassy complained in a cable to the State Department that it was too understaffed to deal with widespread fraud, but Washington refused requests to assign more personnel to adoption cases.

Later, the embassy instituted DNA testing prior to adoption approval in order to match children to the women relinquishing them, a measure that would have prevented Zune from being taken out of the country. But, according to Siegal McIntyre, some of these tests were falsified. Embassy cables from the 1990s through the 2000s show concern about a spike in fraud, but little action. On the rare occasions when the US Embassy slowed down adoptions for further investigation and doubled up on DNA testing, they received a flood of phone calls from members of Congress who were themselves getting angry calls and letters from their constituents—adoptive parents waiting for children.

While the United States waffled, legitimate concerns about criminal and semi-criminal adoptions led to paranoia and panic in Guatemala. In

the early 1990s, rumors—which were never proved—spread that some children who were given up for adoption had been killed, their organs extracted for sale on the international black market. In 1994, Guatemala's leading newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, irresponsibly published a graphic that resembled a butcher's chart, showing what it claimed were prices in US dollars for children's body parts. The most expensive organs were supposedly livers at \$150,000, followed by a set of heart and lungs at \$125,000; pancreases at \$90,000; kidneys at \$65,000; and corneas at \$2,500. (In Guatemala, per capita income that year averaged \$1,300; workers in rural areas earned much less.) Hysteria increased even though *Prensa Libre* cited no sources. Several foreigners who spoke to Guatemalan children or took pictures of them were attacked by large crowds; at least two were killed.

In the end, it was a combination of public protest, the US Embassy's fear of ongoing scandal, and pressure from UNICEF that led to the outright ban on foreign adoptions in 2008. But Guatemala has been slow to reckon with its history of genocide, or connect it to the problem of adoption fraud. In 2013, the year before Zune arrived in Guatemala, the former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was indicted by the attorney general and tried for genocide and crimes against humanity. The prosecution cited adoption files from the 1980s as evidence of genocidal acts. Ríos Montt was convicted, but the judgment was later overturned under political pressure, and last year he died under house arrest while awaiting retrial. Although the truth commission ordered the Guatemalan government to search for the five thousand children who were disappeared during the war, no systematic effort has been initiated. Former generals still control the country, and genocide denial is common.

Wealthy private lawyers who engaged in adoption crimes have mostly gone free. If anyone went to jail, it tended to be the *jaladoras* or the nannies hired by lawyers to look after children before their adoptions. One

prominent exception is Susana Luarca, a lawyer formerly married to a Guatemalan Supreme Court justice, who, in 2006, helped arrange the adoption of a two-year-old girl who was reportedly kidnapped from her parents' patio in San Miguel Petapa, south of Guatemala City. When I visited the parents, Loyda and Dayner Rodríguez, they showed me the tiny dresses that their daughter had worn before she went missing, still folded away in a chest of drawers. Over a decade had passed.

I met Luarca in 2016 at the women's prison in Guatemala City. We spoke in her private cell—a rare luxury—where she keeps three formerly feral cats, one of whom is named after a reggaeton star. She was wearing sandals and showed me her perfectly manicured toenails, saying she had enrolled in a beauty course inside. "I'm the only one who does the homework," she said.

Luarca arranged her first adoption in 1984, for friends—a childless American couple visiting Guatemala. After her divorce, she told me, she made a living facilitating hundreds of adoptions through the private system. Eventually she opened a nursery for the children whose adoption paperwork she was processing. "The fact that I adopted two children myself is not considered a mitigating circumstance. Neither is the fact that I had the most beautiful nursery where the children were the best cared for," Luarca told me. At its peak, her nursery, in the capital's upscale Zone 10—four blocks from the US Embassy—had been staffed by uniformed maids and held up to a hundred babies at once. "Children don't need much space," she said. Luarca did confirm that she worked with *jaladoras*, whom she paid for their services. She did not scrutinize their methods. Luarca told me she's angry that she doesn't have more company inside. Other lawyers, she said, did the same things.

Families searching for disappeared children in Guatemala rely on a nonprofit organization called La Liga Guatemalteca de Higiene Mental, run by Marco Anto-

nio Garavito. Garavito is a compact, warm man with a mustache, who was trained as a social psychologist. Even before the war ended, he began to quietly ask around about the whereabouts of children who had gone missing or were taken by the Army. Now he works with a small staff out of an unmarked office in downtown Guatemala City.

The work of reunifying families is slow and difficult. Birth parents and adoptees rarely speak the same language, and Garavito struggles to find regular translators for all twenty-one Mayan languages. He and his colleagues travel long distances by jeep and on foot to gather testimony in remote parts of Guatemala where the war hit hardest. "We haven't been able to get everywhere, so there are still stories that aren't known," says Garavito. In Argentina, a DNA database has been the most important tool in helping to find stolen children, but La Liga's irregular funding has meant that they are able to match stories more frequently than blood. Despite all this, La Liga has managed to find the families of 488 disappeared children. Thousands more families are still looking.

Zune became friends with Garavito after dropping off a copy of his adoption papers at La Liga, in case he was a match with one of the families in their database. After reviewing Zune's file, Garavito said it was unlikely that he was a victim of the civil war after all. The paperwork for disappeared children—even forms that have been falsified—generally locates the children's birthplaces in the indigenous, highland regions of Guatemala, not the border area near Mexico. For Zune, it is hard to be certain about anything. "According to La Liga, my adoption wasn't because of the war, but due to private trafficking," he told me. "But how to know for sure?"

La Liga's archives are full of testimony from parents, often some variation of the story told by the K'iche' Mayan couple Felipe Sosa Sarat and María Sarat Ordóñez. In 1982, the Guatemalan Army attacked their town, and the couple fled up into the mountains, getting separated in

the confusion. Felipe was shot in the foot while carrying their four-year-old son, whom he set down to seek help and to try to find his wife. When he returned, his son was gone. La Liga discovered that soldiers had found the child and taken him to a military base. He was then given to a private orphanage called La Casa del Niño del Quiché, where staff changed his name, declared him to be in a legal state of abandonment, and gave him up for adoption to a family in the United States. "I just want him to know about everything I did to search for him," Felipe said. "In spite of all the time that has passed I love him just as much, if not more."

When La Liga does manage to match a family to their missing child, Garavito often organizes a Mayan ceremony with candles, incense, and a spread of tamales. He has started inviting Zune, who, understandably, has become something of the star of these ceremonies. Whenever he attends an event, he is surrounded by several rings of parents at all times. One family from Nebaj became convinced that Zune was their son who went missing after a notorious 1982 massacre. Garavito had to break the news gently to both the family and Zune that it was not even worth doing a DNA test, since he was too young to be their son. "They still write me every once in a while to see how I'm doing," Zune told me. He recalled that he sobbed openly when attending his first reunification ceremony, but now considers those events the highlight of his time in Guatemala because of all of the affection shown to him by the parents. "They are all missing children," Garavito said, "and he is the one who came back. They like to imagine that he is theirs."

There are many people in Guatemala and abroad who believe that international adoption should be reopened. The highest-profile advocate is Elizabeth Bartholet, an adoptive mother of two children from Peru and a professor at Harvard Law School. Bartholet acknowledges that there is some fraud

THE SIXTIES

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in international adoption, but she believes the response should be to address the illegality, not, as she put it, to “shut the whole thing down.” “There is a huge cost to be paid by the children who are denied adoptive homes and typically end up in institutions,” she told me. The problem with this view is that most of the children adopted from Guatemala were not orphans or street children, but were sourced by adoption lawyers. One journalist called the idea that most international adoptees are orphans “the lie we love.”

Some conservatives argue that reopening Guatemala to international adoptions could help assuage the current political crisis over migration. The implicit argument is: if Central American families had the option of sending their children for placement with adoptive families in the United States, the whole family wouldn’t have to migrate. Fox News host Laura Ingraham, who adopted a child from Guatemala right before the ban in 2008, brought up the idea in the midst of last summer’s family separation crisis at the border. “We should make adoption easier for American couples,” she said. “Let’s put our hearts out there for the kids in the right way.”

Although the Trump Administration claims it is seeking to reunite families who have been separated at the border, the Associated Press found in October that some children of deported Salvadoran mothers were at risk of being processed for adoption by families in the United States. The AP investigation drew on immigration records, interviews, and hundreds of court documents to show that there are “holes in the system that allow state court judges to grant custody of migrant children to American families without notifying their parents.” One undocumented Guatemalan woman in Missouri, who was arrested in an ICE raid several years ago, sued from prison to stop her one-year-old son from being adopted by an American family. A judge on a Missouri Circuit Court found in favor of the adoptive family, writing about the mother that “smuggling herself into the country is not a life-

style that can provide any stability for the child.”

In December, I visited Zune one last time. He was working at a call center in Guatemala City, making a good salary because he could answer the phones in French, and he commuted back and forth from Jocotenango on his motorcycle. After an overnight shift and a session at the gym, he showed up to meet me in black and neon-yellow athletic wear and said he was taking herbal supplements to keep his energy up.

Zune had written about his search on Facebook, and other adoptees had started to contact him for advice. Many did not have the time or resources to travel to Guatemala but were still hoping to find their birth parents. Zune cautioned them that opportunities to make money from adoptions had not completely dried up after they were banned. A number of former *jaladoras* and others now worked as “searchers,” locating birth parents for a fee of about \$1,000 per case. One searcher I interviewed, who asked not to be identified by name and emphasized that she had not worked as a *jaladora*, said that she had completed hundreds of searches, which often led her to gang-controlled areas in Guatemala City. “I’ve never found a mother who was not poor or exceedingly poor,” she said.

Zune put other adoptees in touch with Garavito and explained how to look for family members without paying a searcher. When I last saw him, he had just hosted a twenty-eight-year-old French adoptee, Mario, in his apartment for three weeks, and they had a great time eating *pepián*, a national dish, and buying handwoven textiles. “He even ate tortillas,” Zune said. Tortillas are one thing Zune never got used to about Guatemala, despite the fact that they are served with every meal. “In my house,” Zune told me, “there will never be tortillas.”

Zune told me that his case had been presented in June before a panel of Guatemalan judges and that the public prosecutors were close to an arrest warrant for Alfredo. He has joined several other Bel-

gian adoptees in a lawsuit against the people who ran the adoption agency, Hacer Puente, with a lawyer who has prosecuted drug traffickers in Belgium. In the meantime, Guatemalan public prosecutors had given Zune closure, of a kind. They still didn’t know who his birth parents were, but told him they are “ninety percent sure” he is Mexican, not Guatemalan.

In the 1980s, Mexican children were often brought into Guatemala for easier and more profitable adoptions. “Everything links me to that trafficking network,” Zune told me. The public prosecutor, Oscar Gálvez, did not want to reveal more information while the investigation was ongoing. Julio Prado, the former public prosecutor, said that, although he hadn’t worked directly on Zune’s case, it was also possible that Zune was the son of a sex worker, since the border zone sees a lot of prostitution. If so, Zune’s mother may even be from another Central American country—Honduras, Nicaragua, or El Salvador. Malacatán, the largest town in the area, was and remains a crossing point for migrants into Mexico on the way to the United States. “Many Central American women migrating to the US ran out of money and stayed,” Prado told me.

I asked Zune whether, if it turned out that he was Mexican or from another country, he would move away and start a new life again. “I swear on my parents, I swear on God, or whoever, that I won’t,” said Zune, laughing. “I came here, I’ve got all the paperwork, I’m not going to reject Guatemala.”

Every time I talk to Zune, he says that he is planning to move back to Europe within the next few months. And every time I go back to Guatemala he is still there. Zune has been saving money to build a small house, and he has his eye on a plot of land near his current apartment. He was recently offered a job in France and is considering accepting. If he goes, he says, he will still buy the plot in Guatemala and will probably retire there one day. He is no longer bothered by having two, three, even several lives. ■

WORKS OF MERCY

The power of pastoral care

By John Crowley



Thirty-two years ago my newborn daughter was discharged from Boston Children's Hospital after an operation to repair a congenital birth defect and a lengthy period of recovery. Her mother and I had prepared for this—we knew the diagnosis from the ultrasound, had done the research you could do in 1986, asked the questions we could learn to ask—and got a good outcome. We went home to the western end of

John Crowley is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. Reading Backwards, a collection of essays and reviews, will appear in August.

the state to raise twin daughters, one with a major disability (“our third child,” her mother says), and found ourselves in a system whose existence we hadn’t known of: Early Childhood Intervention. Physical therapists, psychologists, licensed practical nurses, and the state and public–private agencies that supplied and paid them. They cared for our child, but more than that, they taught *us* how to, and the teaching was as much mental and emotional—call it spiritual—as it was practical. They taught us to watch, to observe, to learn this particular child; to have patience, not to see too much

and fall into useless anxiety, not to see too little and miss the signs of trouble. Close watching actually changed our experience of time. I learned what *mindfulness* meant, even if my practice of it fell short.

Above all, these women (they were nearly all women) were advocates. They advocated for the child to the parents: you have to do this well. They advocated for us to the agencies for which they worked and to those that had aid to distribute. They taught us to be advocates too, in preparation for inevitable emergencies and likely further hospitalizations.

It's well known now that going into a hospital for anything more than the most routine procedures without an advocate is risky. An advocate need not necessarily be someone expert in the proliferating possibilities of medical response but must be good at asking questions and understanding answers, someone who knows the patient thoroughly, not simply the malfunction at hand or the complication that's arisen. Someone who can interpret to the medical staff who this patient is when—whether from disease or fear or confusion—she is unable to be herself; who knows what her tolerances and aversions are, and why it will make for a better outcome to treat her in this way and not that way. I have witnessed such an advocate (my wife, L., actually) intervening to prevent the medical team from making an error, which can take courage.

Medical teams now acknowledge the value of this kind of advocacy, even when it demands extra time from them; they want the likely outcomes of treatment, the drawbacks and the possibilities, clearly understood. They want to respect patients' wishes, and they want their own advice to be useful; they want to offer options—but how are patients and their helpers to choose among them? The greatest need for help in this realm is at the end of life, where increasingly there are choices to be made. Montaigne said we should not worry if we don't know how to die; Nature will do all that for us, he said, we need give no thought to it. But in today's world it's often a matter of negotiation.

Despite the need, not everyone in trouble can summon someone to their side who's good at the hard work of guidance in this fraught environment. It requires practice, discernment, skill at listening and watching. What I have been learning is that a corps of caregivers exists and can be called upon to help people and families in difficult circumstances, even in facing loss of function, absence of remedy, the suffer-

ing and death of loved ones. They aren't part of the medical team, though they often practice in that environment; nor are they nurses' aides or home health care workers. The most inclusive descriptor for what they are said to provide is "pastoral care."

Health care organizations increasingly recognize that meeting the spiritual needs of their patients is part of their mandate, and hospitals must address these needs to receive national

to a spiritual care minister at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, as well as associate and assistant chaplains and resident chaplains across the nation.

Pastors are shepherds, of course; sheep and shepherds are common in the Hebrew Bible, and are frequent metaphors in the New Testament: "Feed my sheep," Jesus commanded his followers. I see the term used not only in the literature of Catholic insti-

tutions but also that of Islamic, Protestant, and Jewish groups. Hospital chaplains are employees of their hospitals. They visit patients who have selected a religious preference upon admission, though they will visit anyone who might need their help. When my daughter was born, L. (from a Jewish family) and I (with a Catholic upbringing) declined to make a selection; in the long period of my daughter's first stay in Boston Children's Hospital, and then in subsequent stays, I don't ever remember seeing one, and wouldn't have known how to respond if one had looked in on us.

Susan Harris is a rabbi certified by the Association of Professional Chaplains, though she doesn't particularly like the word "chaplain," and "pastoral" rubs her even more the wrong way. "Jews don't know from chaplains," she said to me. This doesn't

mean that the work is undefined in Judaism—it is. There are seven chaplains presently at work daily at Boston Children's: three Protestants, two Catholics, one Muslim, and Susan Harris. It was only recently that the hospital hired a Muslim chaplain, but the need for one would be obvious to anyone walking through the luxurious new public areas of Boston Children's: like many top American hospitals, it treats people from around the world, and from the Au Bon Pain to the Family Center and the spectacular animation wall, children are almost always there with their mothers—in their arms, in strollers—and one can log an



accreditation. The provision of care for the sick, disabled, and dying beyond the strictly medical or therapeutic is now a career possibility with many variant descriptions and categories. As of this writing, the online job-search aggregator Indeed listed almost three hundred jobs in answer to the search term "hospice pastoral care," including hospice bereavement coordinator, spiritual care counselor, board certified hospice chaplain, bereavement counselor, and staff chaplain. A search for "hospital pastoral care" reached farther—over six hundred openings, from an associate chaplain in spiritual care at Sanford Health in Sioux Falls, South Dakota,

amazing variety of head coverings, hijabs, and burkas, from lavish to plain.

I met Susan Harris when my now adult daughter returned to Children's for a procedure that turned out to entail far more time and anxiety than had been forecast. The situation called upon all of those watchful waiting skills L. had learned in the early years of motherhood, and which in time she has used on my and her own behalf as well. We hadn't named a religious preference at admittance this time either, but the rabbi noticed that on a floor under her purview was someone who'd been there over a month. Any patient who's been in a hospital room for a month, Harris thought, needed a visit. She was welcome; she was a civilian, someone outside the medical team taking an interest; my daughter was glad to talk about nonmedical matters, just talk. We all needed the company.

Later on, in the cubbyhole office she shares with a large printer, Harris took time to talk to me about her role. A compact, cheerful woman, and a mother herself, she lives near enough to bike to work. She's an ordained rabbi, with an advanced degree in Judaic studies, but a "pulpit-free" one, she says. "I don't consider anybody I see a member of my congregation. That word implies a certain relationship. As a congregant you expect something from your clergy, you expect leadership. To the extent that I do any leading, I lead from behind. For Jewish families it's actually an advantage that I'm not a pulpit rabbi; I don't push anybody's buttons—I don't see them as absent from my pews—and that makes a difference to me."

Harris thinks of herself as a "professional stranger on the bus," someone to whom people can pour out their hearts because most are never going to see her again. "I am witness to what they're going through. People need to make meaning out of the randomness or purposefulness of their lives, and in order to make sense out of your story, even to know what your story is, you have to have someone who can listen. I'm often the person people can practice telling their story to, until they figure out what it is. Is it one of loss, is it one of redemption, is it one of punishment, is it one of frus-

tration? Sometimes the story gets reframed along the way, which is why I keep going back." Some of those she visits see their stories through the lens of theology, and she can do that, claim that authority—if someone asks a rabbi question she'll give a rabbi answer. But if the question is *why is this happening*, she'll claim her own limitations as a human being. "In the moment, there is no reason good enough for why this should be happening. I don't think 'why' questions are helpful. And when it's something of epic, tragic proportions . . . I believe that even if God, God's self, gave me an answer, it wouldn't be good enough."

HARRIS THINKS OF HERSELF AS A "PROFESSIONAL STRANGER ON THE BUS," SOMEONE TO WHOM PEOPLE CAN POUR OUT THEIR HEARTS

Harris's daily work is plainly more active than this suggests. Patient and family troubles around illness and treatment can generate psychic suffering every day, and it is in this realm that Harris might be able to intervene. "I see this place as a laboratory," she said. "In every room the same thing is happening: loving parents, a child who's sick. But different people have very different reactions." She makes a distinction between pain and suffering: young children, like anyone, can feel pain, and it can be anguishing; suffering requires consciousness, a sense of what ought to be the case but isn't. "A young man, Jewish, a wonderful, remarkable man, was in to have a surgical bolt removed from his hip. He showed me the hardware. It made me woozy—it was *this big*. His parents were in the room, literally wringing their hands, and he looked at

them and said, 'Mom, Dad! It's just pain!' He was in pain. *They* were suffering. We've all got pain; suffering is a layer over that."

One of Harris's challenges is parents who see their role as demanding the best for their child and rousing the medical team to give them definite answers about outcomes. "Families want control over what happens. Hospitals talk about giving parents more control. But we aren't ever truly in control—if you were truly in control you wouldn't be here." The parents are her concern too, and she tends to reach them through her attention to the kids: just talking, as a receptive friend would, to children stressed by their parents' anxiety. Often she'll ask young children, *What's your favorite thing about being in the hospital?* Not a question you could ask a grown-up, but a child will name the pet-therapy dog, or the artist-in-residence who decorates their room's wide windows in finger paints, or the game room. The mere presence of a disinterested person can lower the tension in the room. "I'd like to see us develop more capacity for acceptance," Harris said. "Chill! I'm not a passive person. But there is more struggle than there needs to be."

My last question to Harris that day was about death. Death is of course common in hospitals, but in a children's hospital it is surely more devastating. She paused before answering. "There's a Jewish concept—but it's not only Jewish—that we are stewards of our lives; we don't own them. That children are actually guests in our home, and we are caretakers for them as long as we are needed." Harris once learned of a man caring for a teenage son with

a severe heart problem in a room on the same floor of Children's where the man's elder son had died of the same condition some years before. Harris offered to help get him a room on



another floor, but he declined; he was glad to be where his elder son had been. He was a wonderful boy, the man told her, and it was a privilege to have known him. “It matters,” Susan Harris said to me. “All of this matters. It matters that a parent sits beside a child for months in illness. And I think there should be one person asserting to parents that it does matter.”

Harris has seen, she told me, many deaths: of newborns unable to thrive, whose fate is awful but who have hardly been alive at all; and—far more grievous—of older children and adolescents who can understand a little of what they will never have. Most of the children, though, remain unafraid, blessedly unable to feel the tearing knowledge of loss and the existential dread that grown-ups can. Every death is sacred, and to be a witness to it is a privilege. “Personally,” she said, “I take comfort from the fact that so many before me have successfully died.”

The Children’s Hospital Harris works in isn’t quite the place my family came to in 1987. Even then it was only one of the many large medical facilities that filled the Longwood Medical and Academic area (the LMA), a 213-acre site near the Riverway in Boston: there’s Brigham and Women’s (where our twins were born), Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Beth Israel Deaconess, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts Eye and Ear Hospital, and more. It’s far larger now, and growing denser every year. New hospitals, care centers, and research facilities are constantly being built, and older ones are being refitted or converted, merged or expanded. Out of the 2.3 million patients seen every year in the LMA, nearly 100,000 are inpatients. Eighty-one percent of the 57,000 people working in the area are in health care.

Visit any major hospital center in the country and you’ll see—in every clinic, lab, family area, recovery room, and passageway—the name of the individual donor or donors who made that feature possible. (L. often pauses to read them, to wonder who they are.) Major givers now, though, are often banks, corporations, and

foundations that attach their names to entire wings, requiring changes to the old nameplates and creating what can only be called luxury hospitals, striking in their design, large public areas, and wards filled with original art and uplifting messaging. A visit to one can be like visiting a corporate headquarters, and perhaps for that reason the style is familiar and reassuring to some. At Children’s, the pretty little Prouty Garden on the ground floor, created in 1956 by a bequest from the then well-known author Olive Higgins Prouty to be a place where children in treatment and their parents could see grass and trees and flowers—a place as restorative and healing as any chapel—was recently removed so that another tower of wards and clinics can be built. The garden was still there when my daughter was on the mend during her last stay, and she took a visiting friend down to it. She noticed a man—a parent, she assumed—sitting in the sun, head in his hands, in tears.

In the Catholic moral system there is a list of works of mercy enjoined on believers. These are broken out into two kinds, seven of each: the corporal works of mercy and the spiritual works of mercy. The spiritual ones include praying for the living and the dead, comforting the afflicted, admon-

ishing the sinner, and so on; the corporal works instruct us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbor the harborless, visit the sick, ransom the captive, bury the dead. They have been incorporated into Christian practice as Christian, but similar precepts are included in the 613 Mitzvot of Judaism and in Islamic practice; in fact they would seem to be human universals, and to need no explicit divine commandment.

Mercy isn’t compassion, though it can be prompted by compassion. In Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism the recipient of an act of corporal mercy is understood to be—usually unknown to the giver—identical to the divine ordainer of the commandment of mercy. “He who attends on the sick attends on me,” declared the Buddha, when he washed and cleaned a monk lying in his soiled robes, desperately ill with dysentery. Jesus said the same: “I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” A hadith warns Muslims that on the day of Resurrection Mohammed will say, “O son of Adam, I was ill but you did not visit Me.”

Works of mercy might involve nothing more than tithing, or writing checks to charities. But the acts that Jesus and the Buddha describe require the provider to engage fully with the sufferer, to *suffer with*, as



some spiritual counselors term it, and therefore to become one with the sufferer—to undergo, or accept, or allow in: which is what *to suffer* means. Sister Melinda Pellerin of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the pastoral minister at Holy Name Church in Springfield, Massachusetts, used the term “walk with” when I went with her on her rounds—one of those spatial metaphors for spiritual work that seem universal: walking, journeying, accompanying, carrying burdens, coming to a crossroads.

Springfield is a once-wealthy manufacturing city that has declined steadily over many decades, losing jobs and businesses. It has a historically deep African-American community and a large immigrant population. Sister Melinda’s visits to the people of her parish, which is now as Hispanic as it was Italian and Irish in her youth, sometimes take her to Baystate Medical Center, an old Springfield hospital now vastly enlarged by—among other expansions—a wing mainly funded by the insurance firm MassMutual. Mostly, though, her visits are to modest neighborhoods in the city.

The religious women who provide most Catholic pastoral care—educating children, visiting, nursing, dispensing charity, organizing prayer for all the living and the dead—are far fewer now than in the past, and the ones active now tend to do the work differently. Sister Melinda receives a salary from the Holy Name parish, lives in a house with four of her sisters, and spends a good part of every working day in her car. She visits the Women’s Correctional Center in nearby Chicopee two days a week as chaplain.

Sister Melinda knew from her childhood that she wanted to be a religious sister, but she wanted other things too. Her family had come from Louisiana to Springfield, where she was born, and she grew up in Holy Family parish, whose redbrick church is now closed. She went to college, got a master’s degree, taught history, was married, lost her husband to cancer, and only then, at the age of fifty, entered the order. Vatican II had changed the lives of religious sisters, and for Sister Melinda it was all to

the good. The first African American in the Holy Name congregation, she wears everyday clothes, and only a small silver crucifix on a chain; she’s devoted to Pope Francis. She has a delightful and genuine laugh, and the ways of the old church she and I grew up in get their share.

On my first visit with Sister Melinda, we climbed the steep stairs to Lucy’s tidy apartment, a small two-family not far from the church. Lucy was eighty-five and lived alone with her bird; her unmarried grandson lived below, and Lucy had just learned that he had fathered a child. Another grandson was in prison. Lucy had been prescribed an antianxiety medication by a neighborhood clinic, but it made her dizzy and afraid of falling. She had

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gone that day to the optician to find that the glasses she was to pick up were twenty dollars more than she’d been told, and she had to hand over the money she had brought to buy bird food. Sister Melinda listened, gave advice, asked whether Lucy was getting help up and down the stairs. “For a long time she was afraid of the stairs,” Sister Melinda told me later. “She didn’t feel able to get to Mass. But she got her courage back, and her grandson and her son help. I see her at Mass now—she catches my eye, gives me a little wave.”

Not all of Sister Melinda’s cases are parishioners, or even Catholics. My Sister’s House, for women recovering from substance abuse, is open to all, and Sister Melinda meets with the residents monthly. She gathered the donated sewing machines the women meet to use as they practice skills and support one another’s goals. We went to a rehab facility—“not the high-end kind; this is for those with limited resources”—where she visited Dan, a recovering addict whose habit had led to blood sepsis, from which he nearly died. A small, buff, rather fiercely ex-

act man, he’d been staying at Michael’s House, a private facility established by the family of an addicted man who committed suicide. There are fourteen residents at present, governing themselves; Sister Melinda checks in once a week. Most have relapsed, some many times; she’s well aware of the odds. Two of the men from the house were visiting Dan when we arrived—a Baptist and a Lutheran. They all got hugs from Sister Melinda. Everybody gets a hug; they solicit one if she looks to forget. At the end of our second day together I got one, too.

What is it that she does? It can seem simple, a friendly visit, but its power for those she visits is large. They all testified to her goodness and their need for her help. She’s not a therapist; she’s not a certified chaplain like Susan Harris or a professional spiritual care provider. Her training is “hands-on,” she says, earned on Chicago’s North Side when she was a novice, and through volunteering in a desperately poor region of Jamaica at a bare-bones orphanage.

Sister Melinda helps make appointments and recommends services, but mostly she walks with Lucy and Dan, or sits with them and converses, unhurried; the mercy lies in her evident selflessness, her plain good cheer—the mere fact that she does it, and that they depend on her to do it. The spiritual is the practical.

In 1945 over half of Americans who died did so at home. The percentage is greater the farther back you go; a horror of hospitals was common in the nineteenth century, as they were believed to be places that mostly killed you rather than cured you, an assessment for which there was plenty of evidence. Those sick and dying at home received visits from the doctor; in the once-famous Victorian painting *The Doctor* by Sir Luke Fildes, a doctor sits by the makeshift sickbed where a child lies; his grave and wise watching suggests how little else he can do.

Over the course of the twentieth century came modern death, which increasingly happened in hospitals, then in ICUs or emergency rooms or rehab facilities, in open wards or in

private or semiprivate rooms, with rotating teams of doctors and nurses and an ever-growing array of options for intervention. The common hope and expectation of patients, caregivers, and families was that something could be drawn from that array that would deliver the person from death for some period, short or long, if the bewildering and often dreadful suffering attendant on the procedures could be endured, and if the erasure of personhood with drugs could be endured when the suffering could not. Death after such exertions could seem to both doctors and survivors like a defeat, a robbery.

The destructive consequences of heroic measures repeatedly undertaken with little or no chance of success, whether urged by doctors or demanded by patients, are now well documented and taken seriously in medical practice. Attitudes are changing, in part as a result of doctors speaking about these things more frankly—and humbly. The numbers choosing hospice, watchful waiting, and palliative treatment at the end are constantly rising; in his 2014 book *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande asserts that the percentage of deaths at home or out of the hospital is approaching the percentage of seventy years ago:

Whereas deaths in the home declined from a clear majority in 1945 to just 17 percent in the late eighties, since the nineties the numbers here reversed direction ... by 2010, 45 percent of them died in hospice care.

A move from medical care to hospice care requires doctors to certify, and the patient and family to acknowledge, that the end of life is near. But though the papers and the internet are now crowded with advice about how to face mortality, avoidance (in not admitting its imminence, in not speaking Death's name around the mortally ill, in rapidly consigning the remains to non-existence with the least fuss possible) remains the default. Doctors and medical professionals can be conflicted about it as well. Gawande's account of his own coming to understand death as a possible successful outcome doesn't say much about the very large cohort of men and women who serve as guides, comforters, and

advisers to the dying and (just as importantly) to those who will remain.

I had the idea—not uncommon maybe—that *hospice* signified a place, a facility to go to when this process was decided upon. But hospice is not a place; it's a program—minimal treatment for diseases in their last stages, palliative measures to treat pain and anxiety, at-home or homelike circumstances rather than hospital ICUs. There are small hospice centers, mostly connected to religious foundations; but for the most part people in hospice are at home or in care facilities, and the hospice nurses and counselors come to them, making rounds like the doctor in Fildes's painting—or visiting the sick and the dying, as my own father, a doctor, once did.

Rebecca Richards, now retired, was a hospice chaplain in Baltimore for twenty years, and says that she is still “amazed at the mystery and hilarity and beauty of life.” When she'd tell people what she did, they tended to shrink away a bit—they'd tell her it's wonderful that she can do that but they never could; it must be so terribly hard. But it isn't, she says. It's joyful. There are those, both patients and relatives, who are offered hospice care at home and at first refuse it. “They shrink from the idea of a death in the house,” Richards said, “how it would linger there.” But usually they find they can deal with it. “Most of the time relatives, family, friends show up to do their part. They don't always do it well, but they do show up.”

Richards's father died of lung cancer at fifty, when she was twenty-nine. When I met Richards, her mother was in a hospice program, and Richards was caring for her at home. “She's very clear about what she wants,” she told me. “She tells everybody she can't do this any longer, she wants to die, to go home to her Creator, and see her husband and loved ones there. Her other daughters live close. It's kind of a best case.”

Showing families how to speak frankly and stay in the room is a big part of what a chaplain, a hospice worker, or a spiritual counselor does. “If a mother asks, ‘Am I dying? What will happen to me then?’ and they answer, ‘Don't think about that, Mom,

don't go there,’ then they're making her journey harder and lonelier,” Richards said. “Nothing that happens in the dying process is not safe. We are safe. There's no need to panic. Every person who has ever lived has died—it's exactly as common an experience as birth. But for conscious beings it's unprecedented, and can be alarming and distressing. You have to help them, the one dying and the family, to see that they are safe.” If the process goes well, people come to see that dying isn't what they thought it was. “It's a huge transition for all—but often the one who's dying has already made that transition.”

The word *transition* puzzled me, because I could only hear it as meaning a transition from this life to the next, but at length I understood that it means the transition from being an active, living, and doing person with an expectation of more life, to a dying person, with different work to do on behalf of the self and others. It may be that that work doesn't get completed in even the best circumstances, and last questions go unanswered, approaches are spurned—certainly every spiritual counselor has seen that. As transitions go, this one's not an easy one, but surely a good death is worth seeking, no matter what ensues thereafter.

When the basic conditions of traditional death are met in the present—a bed at home or a place of equivalent peace and quiet; people around who watch and help in simple ways—then aspects of dying appear that were not removed but only suppressed or disregarded in the era of modern death. Dying people in the bygone world were said to have commonly seen their dead relations or others known to them—not in the hallucinatory trips of the near-death experience, but in the sickroom with them. Those around the bed, who couldn't see the apparitions, were usually not alarmed or even particularly surprised by these visitors. Sometimes dying persons had visitations from accusing ghosts, or were called to repentance, but mostly they derived great comfort from their presence.

Perhaps, as more people attend differently to dying, these persons in the corners of the room will become com-

mon again in stories of the passing of friends and relations, and from these stories new morals might be drawn. Each of the spiritual advisers I talked to has been told of such visitors. It seems that the accusers are much rarer than the comforters these days; maybe antianxiety meds help. Richards told me of a man she attended in a mobile home, undergoing a hard death from cancer, cared for by his wife. On one visit he greeted her with a blissful smile. What is it? she asked him. I'm just so glad, he replied, so glad you've brought Bobby with you. He continued in calm happiness until the end of her visit. His wife later told her that Bobby was their son, who a few years before had stepped in front of a truck on the highway.

The rabbi, the minister, and the religious sister were all clear that what lies beyond is no part of their remit. If asked for prayers, they will pray, and they are glad if thoughts of heaven or further life comfort the dying, but those who volunteer as hospice helpers are warned in their training not to use their work as an opportunity to win souls for God—though for some it's the very reason they signed on. Such moves are regarded by the professionals as more than inappropriate—as almost abusive, Richards said, because they interfere with and cross up the person's own transition, which is all that matters. Sister Melinda is glad to visit anyone who asks for her. Both Susan Harris and Rebecca Richards say they have learned much from Buddhist thought and practice in recent years, and both see the necessity of removing the self from their encounters, to leave the ones they attend with the space they need to make their own meaning out of life and death.

That meaning gained will remain for the living to have, and can be salvific. In some cultures grief is noisy, and people unburden themselves of it in bewailing; in other cultures, silence or whispers; and in still others, rituals are gone through to assure a good journey beyond. If death is well achieved the one who dies is put away from us even as the passing is mourned. Robert Pogue Harrison, in his profound meditation

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SOLUTION TO THE MARCH PUZZLE

NOTES FOR "PLUS FOURS":

Note: * indicates an anagram.

C	O	I	N	S	U	R	E	S	L	I	P
O	H	O	I	H	F	A	L	L	E	N	E
L	A	R	G	O	S	V	M	A	N	T	A
D	I	S	H	O	N	E	S	T	I	E	S
P	L	O	T	T	Y	N	T	E	T	R	A
L	I	N	C	O	L	N	O	D	R	N	N
U	C	S	P	U	E	A	R	N	E	S	T
M	E	R	I	T	O	S	T	A	L	E	S
P	A	L	E	O	N	T	O	L	O	G	Y
E	X	A	C	T	A	S	I	L	A	G	E
S	E	P	E	I	R	A	S	E	D	O	G
T	S	A	R	C	A	P	E	R	I	N	G

FOUR-LETTER WORDS: a) a(NT)s; b) cape, two mngs.; c) co-in; d) co(l)d; e) D-is-H; f) [Joy] e-[Kil]lm[er]-s; g) log-y[ule]; h) [n]Oise; i) ones, two mngs.; j) onto, hidden; k) [er]otic; l) p[abst]-ale; m) PE-A's; n) pest[o]; o) plum*; p) ring, two mngs.; q) shoo, homophone; r) slip, two mngs.; s) sure*; t) T.(i.e.)S.; u) tort[e]; v) tout, first letters; w) tsar, hidden; x) Y-egg.

ACROSS: 7. f(all)en; 8. lar[ge-car]gos; 9. M(illand)-an-(T)-a; 10. p(l)otty; 11. *; 12. L(inc)OL-n; 17. *; 18. homophone; 19. *; 22. ex-act; 23. s(1-l[asagna])age; 24. e(Pei)ra(rev.).

DOWN: 1. O-(ha)il; 2. nigh-t[en]; 3. Ra-V[I]enna; 4. two mngs.; 5. homophone; 6. Or-sons; 13. *; 14. Leo-Nora; 15. *; 16. *; 20. [c]aller; 21. egg-on, pun.

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TO SIGN UP TODAY

The Dominion of the Dead, tells us what it is we do: "Just as burial lays the dead to rest in earth, so mourning lays them to rest in us." Burying the dead is mercy too. The living and the dead can rest in peace.

The totalizing of the hospital environment can be so overwhelming and disorienting that those who come for care risk being reduced to things, a process that modernization always risks; though treated with great skill and effectiveness, you can still be harmed. You can call it trauma, but it's harm to the spirit and needs spiritual care. The novelist Chris Adrian (*The Children's Hospital*), a palliative-care physician and also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, remembers being "struck during chaplain training by the notion that by employing chaplains the hospital had made a commitment to act against its own tendencies to not listen to and not really care about its patients." If we don't have soul supports we can find ourselves alone in modernity, adrift in treatment-time and treatment-space, without meaning, just when modernity has learned that such supports are worth paying for. Adrian suspects that "most pastoral care in the medical context is being practiced by non-chaplains and non-clergy. Pastoral care as practiced by chaplains is a special iteration of a more general practice, which I am almost brave enough to call *pastoral medicine*."

Pastoral care is now a mature system in itself, trending toward spreadsheet management of its agency-employed friendly visitors, certified paraprofessionals, secular confessors, graduates of the Islamic Ziyara spiritual care education network, nuns with advanced degrees in pastoral ministry, and trained strangers on the bus. Richards is concerned that the corporatizing of hospice programs will result in damage to the good care that matters to her. "Five years ago a national for-profit provider bought the group where I had worked for fifteen years. They eliminated the local office's chaplain and social worker positions. Instead, they call each patient from the central office fifty miles away and do the assessments by phone, offering a visit 'if necessary.'" The group she worked for when we met

didn't do that. It provided good and loving care, though she would have liked to have the staffing to provide something closer to what was possible back when she was a local church pastor, when she might have visited a bedside two or three times a week, or daily at the end of life. But perhaps the balance is right in the end.

A system of corporal works of mercy organized into specialties and paid for by insurance and Medicare depends for its success on human qualities that not everyone possesses. These qualities are hard to select for or to instill, but their lack can be quickly discerned by those who have been sensitized by need. A pivotal moment for Chris Adrian's chaplain-training cohort came when they looked around the conference room and realized they were administering and accepting pastoral care from each other. "It transformed everyone's practice immediately and reduced dramatically the sense of fakery we all had." At the beginning of her career, Susan Harris worked at Massachusetts General Hospital, where she often visited a very old woman who as a child had been sent to a concentration camp; she had a number tattooed on her arm. "Not everyone who touched me in the camps was bad," she once told Harris. "And not everyone who touches me here is good."

With luck it will be a long time till my daughter needs a visit from Susan Harris, or her counterpart in whatever institution she finds herself in. May she be glad of her, or him. Even now I would myself be unwilling to sign up for chaplain visits when it's time for my transition, but it's clear to me that this elaborated pastoral-care system whose margins I have explored is a good or at least hopeful thing, and anyway it's what we have in this secular and fragmented age and place. Dependent as it is for its worth on the wisdom and goodness of others, it's really not that different from what we have had all along, and perhaps it's the best we can ever hope to have in trouble and pain. "To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," William Blake wrote, "all pray in their distress":

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress. ■

MORE THAN A DATA DUMP

Why Julian Assange deserves First Amendment protection

By James C. Goodale

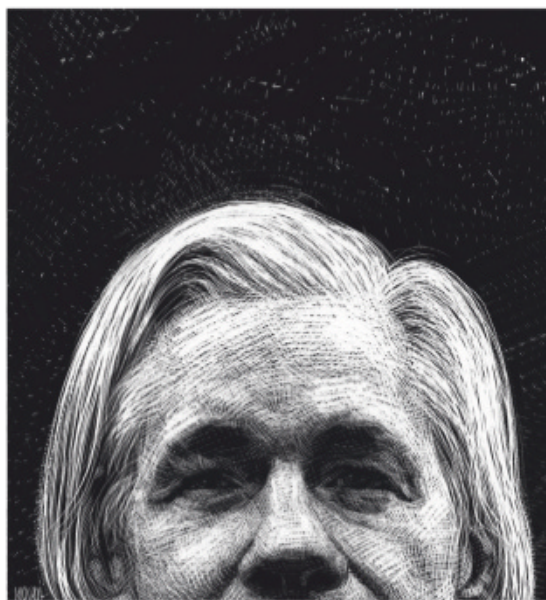
Last fall, a court filing in the Eastern District of Virginia inadvertently suggested that the Justice Department had indicted WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. The *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and other outlets reported soon after that Assange had likely been secretly indicted for conspiring with his sources to publish classified government material and hacked documents belonging to the Democratic National Committee, among other things.

As a veteran of major free-press legal battles, I waited, throughout the days that followed, for journalists to come to Assange's defense. A few reliable advocates, such as the ACLU and the Knight First Amendment Institute, did sound the alarm, but the editorial boards of the *Times* and the *Washington Post* remained silent.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* allowed that Assange's prosecution "could be a slippery slope that would threaten traditional journalists and publishers," but it was quick to note that WikiLeaks was a "shadowy organization" and "not officially a journalistic one." (Of course, there is no body, not even the CJR, that determines what is "officially" a journalistic outfit.)

James C. Goodale is the former general counsel of the New York Times and the author of Fighting for the Press.

Overall, the same mainstream journalists who have treated Donald Trump's disparaging tweets about them as unprecedented threats to their freedom handled Assange's indictment as



a political story, another piece of the ongoing Trump–Russia saga.

In fact, the Trump Administration's prosecution of Assange represents a greater threat to the free press than all of the president's nasty tweets combined. If the prosecution succeeds, investigative reporting based on classified information will be given a near death blow.

Julian Assange started WikiLeaks in 2006 with the stated purpose of providing a place for newsworthy information to be released on a

confidential basis. The site came to widespread international notice a few years later, when Assange obtained thousands of classified documents relating to the Iraq War from US Army soldier Chelsea (née Bradley) Manning. Assange in turn shared these documents with *Le Monde*, *El País*, *Der Spiegel*, the *Guardian*, and the *Times*, each of which separately edited and published what they'd received.

Amid the furor surrounding this publication, politicians from across the political spectrum—Senators Dianne Feinstein and Joseph Lieberman among them—called for Assange's prosecution. Barack Obama's Justice Department seriously considered indicting Assange under the Espionage Act and convened a grand jury for that purpose. The legal theory behind such a prosecution involves charging Assange with conspiring with Manning to release classified materials. Using this "conspiracy" theory, the Espionage Act would be made to apply to a reporter—not directly but indirectly—by using the reporter's relationship with sources. In other words, the reporter would be made responsible for the actions of his sources. (Manning was eventually convicted under the Espionage Act for leaking to Assange.)

The Justice Department has been enamored of this conspiracy approach

since the time of the Pentagon Papers. In that case, Richard Nixon's DOJ attempted to enjoin the *New York Times* and, later, the *Washington Post* from publishing a forty-seven-volume Defense Department study of the history of US relations with Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, which had been classified top secret. I led the team of lawyers who defended the *Times* in that case. I had advised the *Times* that the government would attempt to enjoin publication and thereafter would attempt to prosecute the *Times* criminally. I also advised the *Times* that it would win any case brought against it in the Supreme Court, on First Amendment grounds.

In June 1971, the *Times* published three installments of the papers and was enjoined from further publication, as I had predicted. The *Washington Post* then picked up where the *Times* left off, and both papers ended up in the Supreme Court, which ruled in their favor. The court's decision is now widely considered a legal landmark, since it effectively determined that no injunction could be brought to stop publication of classified material.

The ruling did not, however, determine that newspapers or their reporters were immune from prosecution after the fact. Following the Supreme Court's decision, attorney general John H. Mitchell convened a grand jury in Boston to determine whether there was a conspiracy among *Times* reporter Neil Sheehan and others with respect to the publication of the Pentagon Papers. After a year and a half, the Justice Department gave up and dissolved the grand jury.

Since Assange has already published the leaks in question, he obviously cannot be stopped from publishing them now; all the government can do is prosecute him criminally for obtaining or publishing the leaks in the first place. To date, there never has been a criminal prosecution for this type of behavior. Obama's Justice Department ultimately concluded that a prosecution of Assange would damage the First Amendment. Their decision effectively meant that Assange was entitled to the same constitutional protections given reporters. (A *Washington Post*

story about this decision quoted Obama officials who referred to the "New York Times problem"—i.e., the fact that any precedent set with respect to Assange could be applied to traditional journalistic entities.)

Trump's Justice Department has reversed course on this decision. When Jeff Sessions first came into office as attorney general, he said that one of his top priorities would be going after Assange. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—then the director of the CIA—said, "It is time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is: a non-state, hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia."

While no one knows what's in the DOJ's indictment, it is highly probable that it names Assange as a co-conspirator not only in connection with the Manning leaks but also in connection with the leaks of emails stolen from the DNC and from Hillary Clinton's campaign chair John Podesta, as well as the leaks of classified information detailing the CIA's ability to perform electronic surveillance (the so-called Vault 7 matter).

With respect to the DNC/Podesta leaks, Assange is in the crosshairs of special prosecutor Robert Mueller, who apparently believes that he may have conspired with Russian intelligence and perhaps additionally with members of the Trump campaign to leak the emails. Assange denies both that he received the emails from Russian intelligence and that he provided information to the Trump campaign.

Mueller's January indictment of the former Trump campaign adviser Roger Stone alleges that Stone tried to communicate with Assange through two intermediaries: radio host Randy Credico and political commentator Jerome Corsi. After laying out these allegations, Mueller indicted Stone for lying about his contacts with Credico and Corsi, and for attempting to get Credico to lie before Congress about their conversations. In a later filing, Mueller contended that he had executed search warrants on accounts that contained communication between Stone and "Organization 1," understood to be WikiLeaks. (Stone has pleaded not guilty to all charges.)

Not all of the facts about the DNC leaks have come out yet, so it is hard to know exactly what Assange did. If he explicitly agreed to act as a Russian agent, he should lose his First Amendment protection. On the other hand, if he did no more than what he did with Manning—receive the documents and publish them—he should have that protection. The same is true with respect to the Vault 7 matter: the facts concerning these leaks are not known, but the application of the conspiracy theory to these leaks is presumably the same as in the DNC hack.*

Should Trump's Justice Department succeed in prosecuting Assange, the only safe course of action for a reporter would be to receive information from a leaker passively. As soon as a reporter actively sought the information or cooperated with the source, the reporter would be subject to prosecution. National security reporting, however, is not done by receiving information over the transom. It is naïve to think that reporters can sit around waiting for leaks to fall into their laps. In a recent interview, the longtime investigative reporter Seymour Hersh told me that he obtains classified information through a process of "seduction" in which he spends time trying to induce the source into giving up the information. If he isn't allowed to do that, he says, "It's the end of national security reporting."

It's clear that the Justice Department believes such "seduction" creates a conspiracy between the leaker and the reporter. In its prosecution of the State Department employee Stephen Jin-Woo Kim for leaking classified information about North Korea to a

* Assange may also be indicted for assisting Edward Snowden's flight to Russia, since Sarah Harrison, an Assange adviser, accompanied Snowden on that flight. It has yet to be proved that Assange directed her to do that. Regardless of how this charge plays out, it should not disturb Assange's First Amendment protection for his other actions. Additionally, Assange was arrested on Swedish rape charges in 2010; his current asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London began after the UK attempted to extradite him on those charges in 2012. In May 2017, Sweden dropped the charges.

Fox News reporter, James Rosen, the DOJ stated, in a sealed affidavit, that it considered Rosen a “co-conspirator.” The DOJ filed the affidavit with the D.C. District Court in 2010 to gain access to Rosen’s email, which showed him persuading Kim, asking for the leak time and time again until Kim finally relented. The affidavit was unsealed three years later, to the shock of Rosen and many other journalists.

When Fox News angrily protested that Rosen’s First Amendment rights prevented him from being a co-conspirator, the Obama Justice Department assured Fox that it would not prosecute him. If this type of conspiracy theory were to be applied in a criminal trial, a court would end up examining every effort by a reporter to obtain information. It would criminalize the reporting process. Reporters and their publishers would argue that the First Amendment protected news-gathering efforts such as Rosen’s, but the result would be in doubt in every case.

If reporters can be indicted for talking to their sources, it will mean that the government has created the equivalent of a UK Official Secrets Act—through judicial fiat, without any legislative action.

Given the threat the Justice Department’s actions against Assange pose to the First Amendment, why haven’t more journalists, press organizations, and editorial boards jumped in to support him? Principally it is because journalists dislike what he is doing; they don’t believe he is a “real” journalist and therefore do not see him as entitled to the same protections they enjoy.

Writing in *U.S. News and World Report*, for example, Susan Milligan says, “[J]ournalism] requires research, balance and most of all judgment. . . . Dumping documents—some of them classified—onto a website does not make anyone a journalist.” Add to this my own experience of when I was attacked several years ago by a howling mob of A-list journalists led by the late Morley Safer at a party (for my own book) where I said Assange, as a reporter, was entitled to

First Amendment rights. “He is just a data dumper,” I was told—and most everyone there agreed.

But he’s not just a data dumper. He edited the Manning leaks initially, holding back some material. He may have done the same thing with his other leaks, including the Vault 7 releases. For better or for worse he seeks out information to be published on his website the way other journalists do for their publications. He is a publisher and is entitled to the same First Amendment protections as any other. Nonetheless, in the eyes of establishment journalists he remains a dumper, as well as a rapist, a liar, a thief, and a Russian agent.

One wonders whether the real reason journalists will not support Assange is that they simply don’t get it. They don’t understand how a successful prosecution of Assange would threaten their ability to report. I would suggest that the focus of the mainstream press should not be on whether Assange meets the usual definition of a journalist or whether they approve of what he does. That’s not the point. The point is that he carries out the functions of a journalist, has First Amendment protections (as they do), and should not be prosecuted for what he does. If he is, we are all worse off for it. ■

April Index Sources

1 National Shooting Sports Foundation (Newtown, Conn.)/US Census Bureau (Suitland, Md.); 2 PETA (Norfolk, Va.); 3,4 Brookings Institution (Washington); 5 Smart Politics (Minneapolis); 6 Southern Poverty Law Center (Montgomery, Ala.); 7,8 Scott Huffman, Winthrop University (Rock Hill, S.C.); 9 Embassy of France in the United States (Washington); 10 French Ministry of National Education (Paris); 11,12 Modern Language Association (NYC); 13,14 US Department of Education; 15 Computing Research Association (Washington); 16 Lindsay Bira, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio; 17,18 Amit Basole, Azim Premji University (Bengaluru, India); 19,20 Association of American Publishers (Washington); 21 Andrew Guess, Princeton University (N.J.); 22–25 Pew Research Center (Washington); 26,27 US Bureau of Labor Statistics; 28,29 Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (New Haven, Conn.); 30 Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University (Ithaca, N.Y.); 31 YouGov (NYC); 32,33 PricewaterhouseCoopers (NYC); 34,35 Spectrem Group (Lake Forest, Ill.); 36 Age Wave (Emeryville, Calif.); 37,38 YouGov; 39 Sara Mazrouei, University of Toronto.

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NIGHTMARES AT 20,000 FEET

On the dread of looking down

By Lisa Wells

About six years ago, in Iowa, after taking off in a puddle jumper during a tornado, I developed a sudden and debilitating fear of flying. I was seated across the aisle from a large farm boy in military fatigues who giggled with the first violent pitch. “Don’t worry,” he said, to no one in particular. “In these little planes you feel every bump.” Moments later, we were tossing like an aluminum can on an angry sea, and he reached over to grip my hand. I looked into his terrified eyes; his face was pale and glistening with sweat. “MA’AM,” he shouted. “WE ARE GOING TO MAKE IT.”

He was right, we did make it, but on every flight since, I have acutely felt the nothing beneath me. Upon takeoff, intrusive images of the plane exploding cinch my anus tight as a coin purse and inhibit my ability to breathe. A sheer drop feels imminent from even the calmest skies. Because I do not understand aerodynamics, flight is inconceivable. My

*Lisa Wells is a writer living in Seattle. She is the author of *The Fix*, which won the Iowa Poetry Prize.*



attempts to research the subject only produce more fear. I feel as though my doubt about the possibility of flight is enough to bring us down, the distance between me and the earth closing on command of thought alone. And how has climate change affected the atmosphere? Can we be sure the old rules are still working?

This is the madness my phobia induces—if you must call it a phobia.

While flying, I can’t imagine anything more rational than the spectacular panic skipping through my blood. I don’t understand how anyone on the plane reads or dozes, their faces ghastly in the glow of their tablets. If my fellow passengers gave a moment’s thought to the question of how it is this enormous, leaden contraption transgresses gravity—via what? Some ornate manipulation of ether?—we’d all scream the whole way.

But because my desire to be a reasonable person capable of conducting a normal life exceeds my aversion to flight, I have adopted strategies that allow me to continue taking planes. One useful trick, picked up from the unfortunately named Captain Stacey Chance, creator of the “Fear of Flying Help Course,” is to calibrate my fear against the faces around me, particularly the faces of the flight attendants—faces that are, with rare exception, unperturbed. Another of my tricks is to sit at the window over the wing, as it helps me judge the relative stability of the plane against the horizon during turbulence. Left unchecked by

these procedures, the paranoid doom cycle interprets most environmental stimuli as death omens.

"Anxiety may be compared with dizziness," observed Kierkegaard.

He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down.

I have resolved to not look down.

Some months ago, in the C concourse of the Las Vegas airport, I was boarding a flight bound for Seattle when the little door at the end of the jet bridge opened and a mechanic appeared. The man was bald, but for a few pasted strands, and zipped into too-small coveralls, lending him the appearance of a giant muscular baby. As he cut in front of me, I tried to meet his eyes, but they were resolutely downcast. He wobbled toward the cockpit, and in that limbic instant I understood something was off. Then the smell hit me. The man reeked, as if he'd bathed that morning in vodka. *Good God, I thought, he's absolutely smashed.*

I believed this man was a death omen, and I wished to narc him out, or else selfishly turn on my heel and get out of there, but I've felt the same urgency about a tired-looking pilot (is it possible to fall asleep at the joystick?); about a last-minute change of plane (Rumsfeld logic: Good to avoid the proven malfunction, but what of the new unknown unknowns?); about the overrepresentation of elderly passengers on a plane, who have lived long enough, and so curry no favor with an interventionist God. (Conversely, an abundance of small children soothes the nerves.) I did not dare report the mechanic, because I've learned the hard way to distrust my own perceptions.

Around when the bell rang indicating our arrival at ten thousand feet, a loud squealing sound unfurled from the front of the plane. Minutes passed. One couldn't help but notice a lack of activity in the cabin. No flight attendants feeling

their way up the tilted aisle, no doors slamming on beverage service carts. The squealing went on unabated. It seemed we were slowing down too soon. Leveling off.

"Hey, folks. From the flight deck. Just want to let you know we're aware of the sound in the first-class cabin. We're not sure what's causing it, but rest assured the plane is ... uh, fully pressurized ... and safe to fly."

The plane began to descend. I remembered my training and looked to my neighbors, their faces alert but otherwise inscrutable. Useless to me. We leveled off again, floating then, slow and low over a vast agricultural patchwork. The body is trained to expect specific experiences in flight, and this combination of altitude and speed was wholly foreign. The seasoned business commuters among us began comparing notes: flights aborted for mechanical issues, for monsoons. But even they, these coolest of customers, appeared to be distressed.

"Hey, folks. Good news and bad news—"

A shriek of feedback.

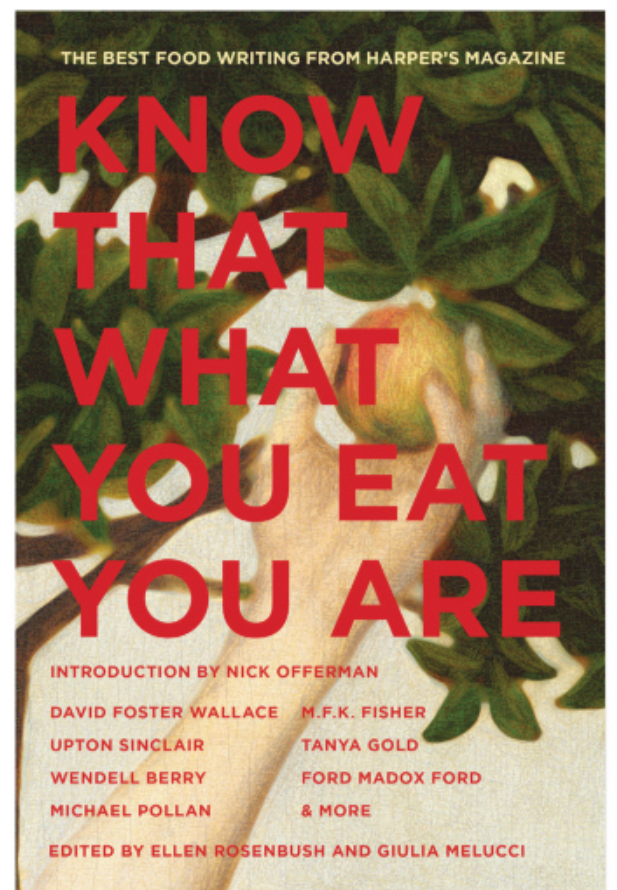
"For Chrissakes," a man exclaimed, a few rows back.

Our plane was taking a hard left, as if along the edge of a framing square. The other passengers began looking to one another, and to me, with wide-eyed alarm.

"Sorry about that. The good news is we got the noise to stop. The bad news is, they don't want us in the air so we're diverting to Oakland."

Beyond the scratched acrylic oval dividing my fragile personal biology from impersonal physical law, I could see we were approaching the Sierra Nevada Mountains. At low altitude, they are uncannily beautiful, like set pieces for a model train, like intricately striated cake icing. Only the level of detail is much sharper, almost hyperrealistic, and this strange, plastic realism distorts perspective, like a dolly-zoom used in film to incite disquiet in the viewer. The eye can't settle. My heart raced the rest of the way.

Forty-five minutes later, I deplaned and made my way to the bathroom, trailing a family of fellow passengers. "That was pilot error!" the man was angrily telling his wife.



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"That was totally unacceptable." The wife's shoulders caved with apparent mortification. "Totally unacceptable," he repeated. Was this man a pilot himself? I doubted it. Based on the way he roared his displeasure at wife and son, I deduced he was a professional know-it-all, the dais anywhere his feet happened to travel. He went on lecturing them about what the pilot should have done until I lost them in the crush of the food court. To each his own anxiety-management strategy.

I rewarded myself for having returned safely to earth with a box of deep-fried food, and carried it back to the now empty gate. As I chewed, pleasantly doped, I reflected on my desire to continue living. Was this feeling of renewal an intrinsic aftereffect of panic? Perhaps my subconscious arranged for intermittent terror, so I could once again experience the ecstatic flush of resurrection? Then, I saw our captain emerge from the Jetway flanked by several crew. The crew blew by, aloof, but the captain stopped at the desk to address the gate agent, a tiny middle-aged brunette. When she turned from her screen to greet him, he let go of his wheelie bag and threw his arms around her, all but hoisting her into the air, and held her there a long moment, his eyes pinched with emotion.

So it was just as I'd feared. We were very nearly fucked.

I have been meditating on this experience following last year's horror show of Southwest Airlines Flight 1380, in which a fan blade broke and an engine exploded, sending shrapnel flying, shattering a window, depressurizing the cabin, and sucking a passenger halfway out of the aircraft, killing her. The passenger was Jennifer Riordan, a forty-three-year-old Wells Fargo executive and mother of two from Albuquerque, New Mexico. It's said that the blunt impact trauma rendered her instantly unconscious, while the rest of the passengers had a full twenty minutes to contemplate their demise. Except they didn't die. The pilot made a heroic landing in Philadelphia, and no one

else was badly injured. Even so, the fulfillment of the nightmare has me in the grip of its portent. It seems to me there is little difference between Riordan's plane and any other vessel traveling six hundred miles an hour, several miles above the earth. Death, in every case, is mere inches from the living woman.

Watching our captain cling to the gate agent, I'd felt betrayed. I thought we had a bargain. The bargain was: I dispute my every thought and feeling, and in exchange, I am never placed in any actual danger. What meaning, I wondered, should I make of this?

Consider the CEO's statement, made on behalf of "the Southwest family," his extension of "deepest sympathies" for the loved ones of "our deceased customer." For it's in the false intimacy of the corporate "family," and the chilly legalese of "deceased customer," that I begin to locate the greater resonance, the final meaning. Flying, for the most part, is a banal experience, and "customer" among the most banal of words—a word of capital and commerce. The beloved dead are identified on tax forms and homicide reports by that most solemn designation: *deceased individual*. The poets are dragged out of their garrets to provide more floral polish: the tender bud of youth flowers, withers, ultimately falls away. Or else the bud's cut short when, as the Slovenes say, *the lady with the scythe comes to visit*. However you want to dress it up, the only meaning to be made is what I'd feared all along. As one man reporting on Riordan's death would put it, and bluntly, "Physics is uncompromising."

Living is the risk the living take, and we know the vessel only travels one direction, though we try hard not to know it. One can spend a whole life talking about death, simply by avoiding the subject. It is a threadbare scrim that divides the shrapnel from the fuselage, the customer from the corpse, my purportedly irrational fear from life's single guarantee: its terminus. Without that scrim, all is void; one long drop, without a single surface to claw at or reference, as much in our own eyes as in the abyss. But who can resist looking down? ■

SETTING THE WORLD TO RIGHTS

By Amos Oz

Translated by Nicholas de Lange

All his life he lived on hatred.

He was a solitary man who hoarded gloom. At night a thick smell filled his bachelor's room on the edge of the kibbutz. His sunken, severe eyes saw shapes in the dark. The hater and his hatred fed on each other. So it has ever been. A solitary, huddled man, if he does not shed tears or play the violin, if he does not fasten his claws in other people, experiences over the years a constantly mounting pressure, until he faces a choice between lunacy and suicide. And those who live around him breathe a sigh of relief.

Good people are afraid of hatred, and even tend not to believe in it. If it appears before their eyes, they generally call it dedication or some such name.

And so we of the kibbutz thought of him as a man who lived by his faith,

Novelist, memoirist, and peace advocate Amos Oz died in December. This story first appeared in Hebrew in 1965.



and who because of his faith dealt severely with the world and with all of us. He was not considered one of the leaders of the kibbutz. His dedication never earned him a position of authority or respect, in a committee or a council, for example. And so it came about that in the course of time we invested him with a halo of self-sufficient reticence.

This halo preserved him from gossip. What can one say, he is not like everyone else, he says little and does much. Admittedly, a solitary man. It can't be helped. But the kibbutz depends for its existence on men like him. And if he sometimes says harsh things about us, we are forced to admit to ourselves that our everyday lives do not always conform to the ideals that we profess, and consequently we deserve his rebukes.

He works with machines.

At six o'clock every morning he is awakened by his alarm clock. He struggles into his greasy overalls and

goes down to the dining hall. Here he munches a thick slice of brown bread smothered in jam and washes it down with coffee. Then, from quarter past six to nine o'clock, he dirties himself with grease in a tin shed, which roasts like an oven in the summer heat, while in winter the rain beats upon it a dull, monotonous tattoo. At nine he returns to the hall and washes his rough hands

with paraffin, with coarse soap and with ordinary soap, to get rid of the black grease. But the black never goes away, it merely turns gray.

Over breakfast he casts his eye over the outer edges of the morning paper, looking for news on which hatred can flourish: crime, corruption, degeneracy, betrayal of the ideals for which the State was founded.

After breakfast he returns to his shed. This is his battlefield against cogwheels, fan belts, carburetors and radiators, spark plugs, and batteries. We see in him a skilled craftsman and, in our usual undemonstrative way, we admire his workmanship. He wrestles with implements and components as if they had a will of their own—a treacherous, rebellious will that it is his task to subjugate and set on the right path. Only on rare occasions does he hurl some part away and hiss: “It’s no good. Dead. We’ll have to get a new one.” On such rare occasions he resembles a military commander who has suffered a setback that he resolves to bear with dignity but with clenched teeth.

In most cases, however, he manages to mend, to repair, to set to rights. His sunken eyes fasten on a rebellious oil pump, and there is suppressed rage coupled with infinite patience in his look. A schoolmasterly patience, we once remarked to ourselves.

The two phrases most commonly heard on his lips are “we’ll see” and “so that’s it.” At times he grinds between his teeth the word “really.”

He is a heavily built man. So heavily that it sometimes seems as if the lines of his face and body are sagging gradually downward, as though he suffers more than most men from the law of gravity. The furrows in his face are vertical, so are the hopeless wrinkles round his mouth, his broad shoulders are hunched, his hands dangle when he walks, even his gray hair always falls down over his forehead.

At half past twelve he leaves the shed and walks up to the dining hall. He always piles his plate high with meat, potatoes, and an indiscriminate assortment of vegetables. While he vigorously masticates this meal his eyes once more run over the newspaper, finding change and decay in all around.

At quarter past one he returns to the shed and works until close on four o’clock. These are the hardest hours. In summer the shed roasts, and in winter the wind’s icy claws penetrate through the broken windows. He sighs deeply, almost aloud, but staunchly carries on with his work. He spreads a black piece of sacking on the concrete floor under the machine and prostrates himself on it so to peer into the motor from beneath. In twenty-seven years he has never entered a single day’s illness in the kibbutz work register.

When his working day is over, he returns once more to the hall. He gorges himself again, as he did first thing in the morning, on brown bread and jam. He washes it down with warm milk. Then he goes to his room. Here he showers, shaves, lies down on his bachelor’s bed, and leafs through the newspaper until he dozes off. He has still not reached the middle pages.

The evening twilight wakes him from his nap as if it had bitten him. At this time he is always seized by a great dread, despair, a premonition. As if this twilight were final. Once and for all. He hurriedly puts on his trousers, makes himself a cup of coffee, and settles himself in the armchair to tackle the middle pages of the paper. As he reads the leading article, the commentary and analysis columns, the personal opinions, summaries of the speeches by the leaders of the Movement and the Party, he experiences a pain that is almost physical. His face wears an expression of ascetic, mortified severity, far from all charity or compassion. Damn them. What are they doing to us. Why do they ruin everything worthwhile. There is a grim judicial look in his eye. His lips tremble. Occasionally there flashes in his eyes a momentary sparkle of hatred, the hatred that others interpret as dedication. He follows the articles with his pencil. Makes notes. Not in words but with signs alone. Question mark. Question mark, exclamation mark. Vertical stroke. Double exclamation marks. And sometimes even a furious crossing out in the body of the article.

The twilight fades and darkness comes on. He must turn on the light. The electric light tires his eyes and dulls his alertness without which lucid thought is impossible. He is terrified

of this yellow light, as if it were trying to bribe him, to subvert his judgment. Clear reasoning becomes cloudy, and after half an hour or an hour apparitions begin to arrive. He can no longer pursue the claim of sharp, analytical argument. He no longer has the power to bring the current events of which the paper speaks before the high tribunal of the teaching of the great visionaries, the fathers of the Movement. And he is tired of judging. The electric light hurts his eyes. He stares vacantly. Apparitions come to him. And with them comes pain. His face loses its grim, judicial expression, which can, albeit with great difficulty, be described as attractive or even spiritual, and without it he is suddenly an ugly, an almost unbearably ugly man. The kibbutz children call him “wicked Haman” behind his back, and point their fingers at him.

But the time between the onset of twilight and the arrival of the darkness is the best time of all. He has this time, before he must turn the electric light on and submit to tiredness and haziness, to put things in their proper order. He studies the newspaper with pure, ice-cold hatred. He drafts the charge sheet with penetrating acuteness, section after section. How the State has betrayed her visionaries’ vision, how she played the whore and defiled herself. A whole nation is giving itself up to debauchery and abandoning every vision. The Jewish State was meant to begin a new chapter in the history of the Jews, and instead it is coming to look like a kind of farewell party, an orgy to celebrate the happy ending of the terrible history of the Jews. But the terrible history is still at its height. The knives are even now being sharpened.

For generations upon generations the Jews were a deep and serious people. Now they have become a degenerate Levantine rabble, rushing to gratify themselves and satisfy their lusts with every kind of novel excitement. Until one day the enemy will come and gather in his spoil like driftwood, and we shall wake up to find that all our hopes have turned to dust. People do not perish through military defeat or economic collapse. They do not understand this. Even those who call themselves the leaders, the heirs of the fathers of the

Movement, do not understand it. No, peoples fall into decay, and only then does the enemy come and enter the gate; he conquers everything at the height of the feast, when the defenders are besotted and enfeebled. Disaster will strike like lightning out of a clear sky. At the height of the great banquet. It is not war that will destroy the land, but corruption. Already the stench lies heavy on the air, night is falling, everything is becoming hazy in this yellow electric light. Perhaps I ought to write a letter to the editor. But who am I.

A good pair of spectacles might perhaps have relieved this suffering. But this simple solution does not occur to him. Wearily and painfully he squints at the yellow light bulb and sees apparitions. He sees the crowds of voluptuous painted women thronging the city streets as though they were born only to give and receive pleasure. He sees the young men, dressed like Americans in the pictures, wearing elegant ties fastened with silver clips. They wear dark glasses and a purposeful air. He sees the boys and girls, grandchildren of the Maccabees, heirs of the guardians and defenders and dreamers, and here they are wrecking the public telephones or singing dirty songs in the streets at night. He sees the outrageously low-cut dress of his younger sister, Esther. He sees her shapely form boarding the Italian airplane: parting at the airport. They are only going away for a few years, she and her husband, Gideon, until he is promoted to a respectable office job that will allow him to live permanently in his own town instead of roaming around foreign capitals like an errand boy. Then the feel of his sister's body in their parting embrace. He sees the plane: the hubbub of people arriving, leaving, seeing off, meeting, the stewards loving everyone indiscriminately, and me in the middle of this airport carnival like an evil spirit: why are they all leaving, why all this commotion, what's the matter, surely at times like this we should all be overcome with wonderment. Then the sound of the tires on the gray asphalt, like lecherous whippers in the middle of the night: two o'clock in the morning, in a stream of quiet, powerful, brightly colored cars in which new, free Jews sit two by two, male and female. Where are they go-

ing, all these crowds of people, at two o'clock in the morning. Who will get up for work tomorrow. And who needs these new buildings, concrete and glass, curved shapes like a woman's hips. All the contagious effluvia of America in this land of dreams. Even the Hebrew policeman in the night smiles a kind of stylized, courteous smile at me as if he too shares in the universal friendliness. And the universal sobriety. The whispering seduction. The cold humor, which is lechery, which is seething debauchery, which is abomination itself. We tried to realize a dream, and it has all turned into Hollywood. The Land of Israel is a whore. The man who hates his country is called a traitor, but the man who hates the treacherous whore is truly loyal to the dream that has been betrayed. If the pain in your eyes is driving you to distraction, you can always go out into the darkness and take a little walk outside the kibbutz, then make a good supper of a huge salad with cream and salt fish, three slices of bread and cream cheese, and two glasses of tea. Should you find yourself next to someone suitable, you can sit and chat. Not about party strategy, calculations of political profit and loss, but about setting the world to rights.

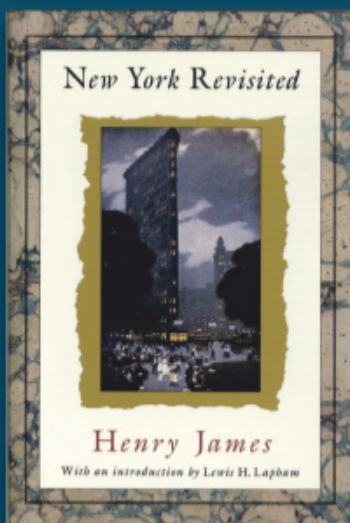
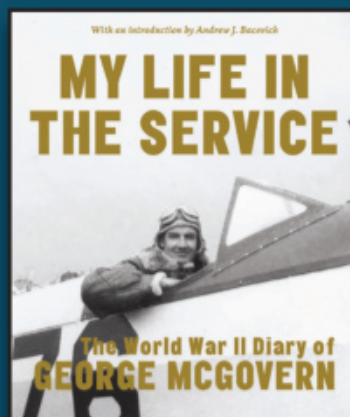
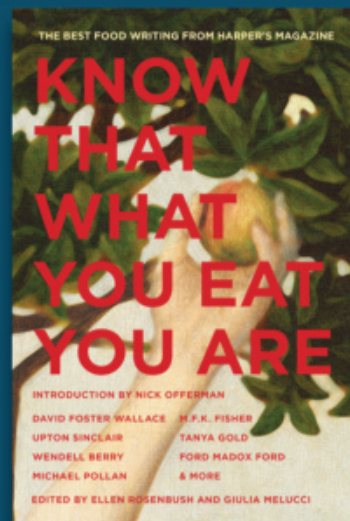
After supper he does not leave the hall, but takes a seat at the table where the evening newspaper is being read. This is the copy that the treasurer has brought back with him from town. It is surrounded by a ring of veteran comrades. Those who are standing read standing, over the heads of those who are seated. And some of those who are seated read upside down. Gradually a discussion begins, an argument develops.

It begins with explanations, interpretations, comparisons between what is happening now and what happened in the old days. Then the heat rises, because the discussion turns to what ought to happen, and what we should be doing. There are moderates and there are extremists, and there are those who always seek the golden mean between the two.

Most of them are unable to see where things are leading. Or perhaps they consciously deceive themselves. He is obliged to open their eyes,

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because these are the last of the faithful. He sets to work explaining to them how the rot has attacked the roots. How this crazy country is gorging itself on its own flesh unawares. Admittedly, the structure is still growing and spreading. Apparently, settlements are being added, new roads are being built. But any biologist will testify that even a corpse will go on growing hair and nails until it is decomposed. The whole structure is already doomed to destruction, from corruption and into corruption. The cancer will feed on the whore until she dies. Drunken shouts, parochial boasts, empty words cannot conceal the treachery. The people have betrayed their leaders, the leaders have betrayed the people, and both alike have betrayed the vision. The kibbutz might have been the last bastion of the Third Commonwealth, but even it has been betrayed, its leaders and people have gone together to the whore.

All his listeners discern a great deal of exaggeration in this, but the older veterans know that it contains an element of holy anger, and perhaps even truth, and it is as well for some of the younger men to take these words at their face value and perhaps receive a jolt.

But the younger men, three or four in number, merely grin. They find it strange that a man can be a brilliant mechanic and at the same time such an utter fool.

Since the disputants are workingmen, not layabouts, they generally stop toward ten o'clock and say: "We'll talk about this some other time. We'll argue it all out then."

Then they all go to their rooms, and only the night watchmen are left awake, and even they do not go out and lurk in the dark along the perimeter fence but linger in the dining hall, taking tiny sips of their tea to kill time and flirting with the night nurses, who ought to be at the nursery, not here. Nothing is as it should be.

He goes back to his room. He crosses the lawn and finds a sprinkler left on and a leaking hose. He must conquer his hatred. Reaching his room, he turns on the light. Again it hurts his eyes. Despite the tiredness he takes an old tome down from the rough wooden bookcase and settles himself to read the words of the founders. Others still

sustain themselves on what they have read in their youth and do not realize that forgetfulness is gradually eating away at their faith.

Whereas he persistently returns every evening to what he was taught many years ago in the Zionist Youth Movement in Lithuania. He devotes himself, heart and soul, to the cruel beauty of the words of the vision. True, most of the fathers of the Movement did not write in polished Hebrew, but their thinking was polished, and nothing of their analytical vigor has been lost. And there are some pages that only now, in these unsavory times, suddenly take on the full depth of their meaning.

After a few pages, tiredness gets the better of him: he is no longer young, he spends long hours each day in arduous physical work, and every evening he wrestles with all his might with theories and ideas. Obviously he would have liked to go on reading with all his might and main, only his body is tired.

During the night the thick smell always begins to fill the room. Even in summer, when all the windows are wide open, there is no refuge from it. The sounds of the night come in and swoop at him as soon as he turns out the light and tries to go to sleep. Even a man with a clear view of the world is helpless in the face of these wild sounds.

He tries to hear in the sounds an echo of his thoughts, either by a play on the words "wind" and "spirit" or by translating the howling of the jackals into the wailing of foxes, which is a common image for national calamity, and also for lunacy and death. But the night sounds here in our kibbutz between the mountains and the winding valleys are stronger than any image; they sweep everything away, they swoop down on you in the night, and words are lost.

He was a solitary man who hoarded gloom. The hater and his hatred fed on each other. So it has ever been. Many years ago he had a wife: a refugee, odd, very thin, acid, a survivor of one of the ghetto risings. She had come here to tell him how both his brothers had died heroically, firing at the Germans until their ammunition ran out. She went on talking.

When she stopped, night had fallen. So she stayed the night. And the next night. She was several years older than he.

After their marriage, she tried to make him leave the kibbutz. Her plan was to live on help from her relations, on German reparation money, to set herself up properly and live well. The kibbutz was a good enough place, but not for her. She had suffered enough for the Jewish people: let others suffer now for a change; she wanted to live a little, at long last.

She was thin and acid. Her body satisfied and yet did not satisfy his hunger. After a few months they parted. She went her way, he remained. Her relations gave her a little, the reparation money made up the rest, and she opened a fashion salon that was every bit as good as the salon she had had in Warsaw before.

Since she had not remarried, he continued to visit her on his rare trips to town. He went to beg for her body. Sometimes she granted it, with a sigh, telling him to be quick and not mess about, chiding herself for her good nature, which was always landing her in trouble. He would start arguing with her about the point of it all. He hated her, of course, with all his heart. But this was a daytime hatred, which was entirely different from the nocturnal hatred to which the night sounds outside responded.

The night is alive. His sunken, severe eyes see shapes in the dark. The room is not clean. Dust here and there. Under the bed a forgotten pair of socks. The sound of the crickets comes in waves. Distant lowing of cattle. A shriek. A tractor growling in a far-off field. Dogs barking as though demented. Laughter of couples crossing the lawn, sinking into the darkness of the wadi. Damn them. And jackals in the vineyard. A hot wind blows from the desert and ruffles the trees, warning them of the fire and the axe for which they are growing: there is nothing new in the world.

He tries turning on the radio to silence these tormenting sounds. What is there on the radio? A sensual tune, a lascivious song, a sickeningly warm, moist voice. He switches it off and curses the singer, and meanwhile all

the night sounds return. Sleep hits him suddenly, like a *coup de grâce*.

In his sleep, voluptuous women, with hips and laughter and hair.

Then a scream may sound in the night. The watchmen say: "Poor devil. What can be done."

A few days before New Year, he went to Tel Aviv in connection with his work, to inspect and possibly order a new kind of American piston.

As usual, he went to see his ex-wife. She made him coffee. They argued a little about the news and the point of it all. He asked for her body. She refused, and he begged a little. In vain: it transpired that she was about to remarry. No, not for love. What a crazy idea: Who would marry for love, at her age and with her experience? No. Her man was also from Warsaw, he had also lost his former family, he too had been miraculously saved, and he too dealt in ladies' clothes. Together they could go far.

He left his ex-wife without saying goodbye.

He stepped hesitantly out into the city. Gradually his stride became more confident and even furious. He went to his sister's flat, forgetting that she and her husband were in Europe, and would remain there for another year or two at least, until Gideon got his promotion.

The tenants received him politely. They thought he had come to check up on the state of the furniture. They promised they were taking good care of the flat. They invited him in, to have a drink and to ascertain with his own eyes that everything was in good order. But he stood in the doorway, cursed them, and left. He walked the streets of Tel Aviv until nightfall, and saw that everything was lost. At dusk the fluorescent streetlights came on and hurt his eyes. He turned onto the dark side streets. Toward midnight he came on the agricultural machinery showrooms where he had intended to inspect and possibly order the new piston he had read about in the prospectus. The street was in darkness, and the showroom was closed and deserted. A wave of hatred rose in his chest until he could hear his own breathing. The bastards had shut up

shop and gone off to chase women. How wonderful were the early fathers of the Labor Movement, who foresaw it all and even warned us in advance. We made light of their writings. Even a corpse goes on growing hair and nails until it finally rots.

At the end of the same street he picked up a whore, followed her to a cheap hotel, and gave her the money he had intended to spend in the showroom. He stayed with her till morning and hated her and himself profoundly. Next day he returned to the kibbutz and worked on his machines; he read the special New Year number of the newspaper from cover to cover and waited for darkness to fall. When it was dark he went out to the orchard and hanged himself from a tree. We found him after the festival, and praised his devotion to his work, and his dedication to the ideals to which we hold fast.

The burial of a man who has devoted himself to setting the world to rights is no different from that of any other man, and we have nothing more to add. He was a solitary man. May he rest in peace. ■

HARPER'S

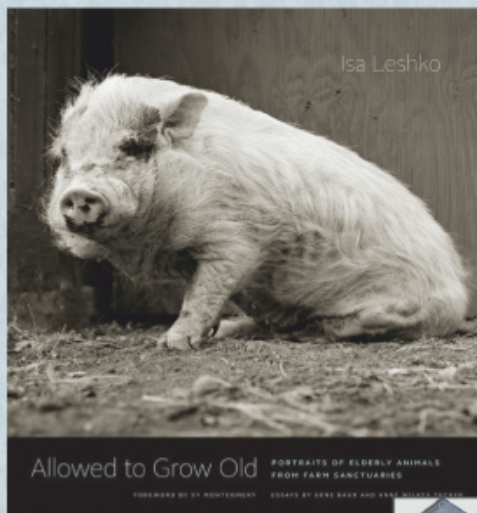


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Chicago



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Isa Leshko

With a Foreword by Sy Montgomery and Essays by Gene Baur and Anne Wilkes Tucker

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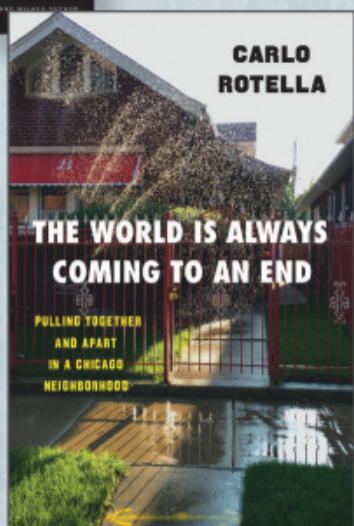
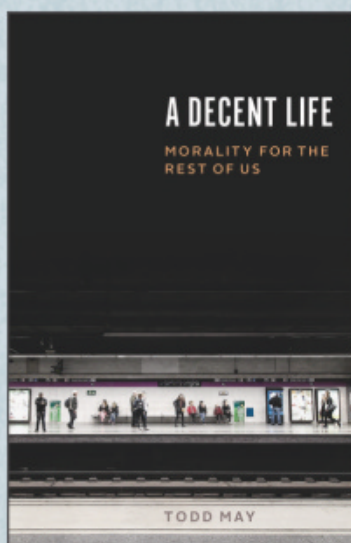
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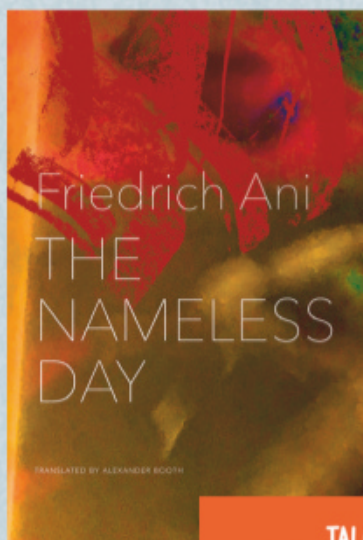
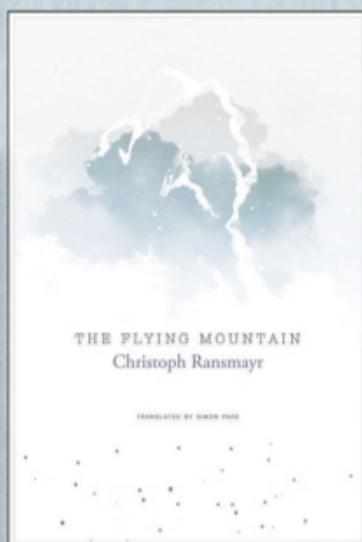
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Paper \$21.50



NEW BOOKS

By Lidija Haas



In “Shrink,” a short piece from her 1993 book *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*, the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić recounts, or imagines, trying to explain her problems to a New York psychotherapist. They don’t get far, because the Ugrešić character keeps getting tangled up in the history of the former Yugoslavia, which she has just left, and in the bloody wars still raging there, while the cartoonish shrink is keen to skip this “horror film” stuff and “get to the fundamental source of your frustration as quickly as possible.” When I first read this story, at age ten, it sounded like a joke about America, or about therapy. Now it seems to be more about history, and how (or if) you can live with it. “I walk down Fifth Avenue and suddenly see the buildings falling like card houses,” the patient reports.

Everything is mixed up in my head, everything exists simultaneously, nothing has just one meaning any more,

nothing is firm any longer, not the earth, not frontiers, not people, not houses ... Everything is so fragile it seems it will shatter any minute.

That’s an experience that would be all too familiar to Andreas Ban, narrator of *EEG* (New Directions, \$18.95), the last novel by the Croatian writer Daša Drndić, who died last year. Although here Ban himself is the shrink, or, as he’s described in Drndić’s earlier novel *Belladonna*, which cast him as its third-person protagonist, “a psychologist who does not psychologize any more. A writer who no longer writes.” (Celia Hawkesworth translated both books, as well as the Ugrešić.) *EEG* begins just after Ban has attempted suicide and survived—that is, failed. As its title may suggest, the novel is structured somewhat like a scan of his brain

activity, which is to say that it’s associative, looping, digressive: thrilling and deliberately infuriating in equal measure. By the same token, it’s also, like several of Drndić’s other books, an experiment in how much of the horrific twentieth century one work of fiction can swallow without breaking apart.

Here, as with the famous list of names in Drndić’s best-known novel, *Trieste*—some forty-four pages, each four columns wide, of Jews killed or deported in Italian territory between 1943 and 1945—are more Homeric catalogues of the slain: there are Soviet records in Russian (not even transliterated) that compile dates, secret-police charges, place and method of death; a thorough accounting of the fates of European chess players that traces a good deal of Nazi and NKVD activity along the way; and a twenty-page, small-print table logging books looted from the homes of Croatian Jews in Zagreb, in 1941. The *Trieste* list is headed “Behind Every Name There Is a Story.” *EEG*, too, is centrally concerned with the question of what needs to be recorded—and what doesn’t. We learn of Ban’s on-and-off relationship with a woman named Leila—“just an ordinary love affair, with quite a lot of wine and sex”—and then hear little about her until we skip to the point decades later when she

had reappeared old and fat and constantly drunk, and I had had my own tribulations, my own deaths, my own solitudes, my own wanderings through the world, my own illnesses.

(What’s really of interest about Leila, it turns out, is her father’s service in the Wehrmacht.) And Ban isn’t above withholding a backstory as punishment. Of his father’s widow, his stepmother, he says: “I won’t go all the way back to her childhood to find when or why that woman developed her obsessive need to control. Fuck that woman’s childhood.”

You might plausibly detect just a hint of glee in Drndić’s determination to keep the reader trapped inside the mind of this cranky



old man who is overwhelmed by every affront—down to the aggressive banality of advertising and the café-goers shrieking into their cell phones. Ban is someone for whom each forest hides a mass grave and even the shortest city stroll is riddled with plaques commemorating unimaginable crimes (or else, much worse, the hypocrisy and denial signaled by the absence of such memorials). Even a writer's retreat in Tuscany is the occasion for an excursus on the wartime conduct of the Italian aristocracy (it's at least as bad as you'd think). Yet the force of Ban's anger and the leaping, unexpected connections he draws are exhilarating, restoring the reality of all those cutoff lives, along with the reader's capacity to take in the scale of complicity involved—from the CIA's harboring of Nazi war criminals to the tawdry record of Croat nationalism—and to register history's shocks anew.

Ban occasionally breaks the fourth wall to address the possible objections of Drndić's readers, mocking their attachment to harmonious narrative structure or the kind of characters that count as fully realized: "Who is ever and anywhere rounded, and is it necessary to be 'complete' and rounded in order to exist—to live—in a complete and rounded way? Unbelievable idiocies." These formal questions seem connected to moral ones. You can't help but notice that many of the frills of the pre-modernist, bourgeois novel—the food and furnishings and clothing that mark out who is real and to be cared about—are precisely those trappings of civilization that were routinely looted in the past century, the "works of fine art and jewelry," even the

pillows, frying pans, saucepans and teapots, children's toys, from dolls and bowls to little cars and electric model railways, the theft in fact of *everything* that makes a life, the theft of the *life* of those whose physical life was also taken from them.

EEG is a monument against the common notion that political convictions soften with age, as you learn to let the world off the hook. Neither Drndić nor her books did any such thing.

Remembrance is likewise crucial to the Mexican writer Julián Herbert's project in **THE HOUSE OF THE PAIN OF OTHERS: CHRONICLE OF A SMALL GENOCIDE** (Graywolf, \$16, translated by Christina MacSweeney), although where Drndić is commanding, Herbert mostly opts to cajole. His book, which also offers lists of names and carefully reconstructed atrocities, centers on the killings of some three hundred Chinese residents of Torreón over a few days in May 1911, while the city was being taken by revolutionary forces. Like some of Drndić's preoccupations, this massacre is in a more or less continuous state of being forgotten. Even when it is allowed into the official Mexican narrative, it's most often blamed on rampaging revolutionary outsiders—the favorite is Pancho Villa, though in fact he was hundreds of miles away, taking Ciudad Juárez—or explained as an unfortunate, spontaneous outpouring of xenophobic rage by local people living in poverty. Herbert has a more complex and more damning story to tell, one that implicates a far greater swath of Mexican society—not to mention the national authorities, who studiously minimized it afterward. He takes on, as Drndić did, the dishonesties and self-deceptions that can keep the politics of an entire country rotten all the way down.

The book is both vivid and enthusiastically researched, examining each piece of available evidence to establish what must have happened at every stage and how it was obscured, then and later. Herbert re-creates the history of Torreón and its Chinese community, how they thrived and who saw them as an economic threat. (He favors all kinds of local color; the book's title, rather brilliantly, is the nickname of the soccer team's home stadium.) Here and there, he'll allow his research to slip into empathic identifications, imagining, for instance, a Mexican mother of half-Chinese kids having to watch

a bunch of killers take their hatred of you out on your children, never giving you the chance to shoulder the burden of the hate the world metes out on [them] because their skin is a different color.

Or he'll offer a passing flash of self-revelation, just enough to place

himself within the society he's describing, as when he notices on someone's face "the dull molten-glass light common among meth smokers," which "I've seen on many other faces, and also in my own mirror." He quotes, too, a "dizzily Balzacian paragraph" in an earlier account that lists the items plundered from the victims in the days when they became a target—again, a life's worth: the books and clothing and writing desks and leather notebooks and silver inkstands, the paintings and bedclothes and underwear. Herbert simply adds: "It was not yet nine in the morning."

The House of the Pain of Others began as a short essay and ballooned from there, until at one point Herbert, a poet, musician, and writer of fiction (including the autobiographical *Tomb Song*) noticed that "the impulse toward the great Mexican novel had taken hold of me like a fever." What he decided on in the end is a so-called gonzo *crónica*, "a stylized cross section of history that would bring together the events of the past, and the dents they have left in the present (and in me)." It's also a "denunciation" in disguise, "an oblique reflection on violence in Mexico," published in the wake of the infamous disappearance of forty-three teaching students from Ayotzinapa in Guerrero. When Herbert asks a Torreón cabdriver just who killed the Chinese there, the man collapses the intervening century by suggesting it must have been the Zetas, one of the most notorious drug cartels: "They're the jerks that kill everyone." This may say as much about everyday life in Mexico as it does about the general ignorance of the Torreón massacre, bringing to mind the grim series of false alarms that followed the disappearance of the forty-three, in which bodies kept turning up, but not the ones they were searching for. As in Drndić's Europe, it seems the graves are everywhere.

For the Irish novelist Sally Rooney, a Marxist not yet thirty who was last year anointed the voice of her generation in the British press, any anxieties on the question

of narrative form have so far been kept admirably in check. Both the word-of-mouth hit *Conversations with Friends* and her second book, **NORMAL PEOPLE** (Hogarth, \$26), are realist novels of just the nineteenth-century kind whose bounds, Andreas Ban implies, have been breached by the events of the twentieth and beyond. They're marvels of restraint, combining deft social observation—especially of shifts of power between individuals and groups—with acute feeling. Rooney is precise and leaves a lot unsaid, though the directness of her descriptions tends to belie this—she's a master of the kind of millennial deadpan that appears to skewer a whole life and personality in a sentence or two, leaving the knots of anguish and confusion beneath. Take Frances, the college-student narrator of *Conversations with Friends*, on entering the house of an older and slightly famous married couple, Melissa and Nick, for the first time, dazzled and disdainful at once: "I remember seeing a dark wooden bowl filled with bright fruit, and noticing the glass conservatory. Rich people, I thought. I was always thinking about rich people then."

One of the more striking elements of Rooney's debut was her ability to show how people's politics do and don't inflect their everyday lives—the tensions they create, how they inform jokes and arguments. The protagonists of *Normal People*, Marianne and Connell, are schoolmates in rural Ireland—she, the isolated, often miserable daughter of a well-off family; he, the brilliant, athletic son of a single mother, Lorraine, who cleans Marianne's house. The novel maps their relationship in intense bursts punctuated by carefully dated gaps, usually of several months at a time (though there's one of only a few minutes). This narrowness of focus—more extreme than that of *Conversations with Friends*, though this book replaces its first-person narrator with a close third following Connell and

Marianne in turn—brings the snippets we see of the social environment into sharper relief. At one point, Connell wins a major scholarship and can suddenly afford a continental vacation, full of those gorgeous trappings of the realist novel:

It's like something he assumed was just a painted backdrop all his life has revealed itself to be real: foreign cities are real, and famous artworks, and underground railway systems, and remnants of the Berlin Wall. That's money, the substance that makes the world real. There's something so corrupt and sexy about it.

(One other thing Rooney makes both real and sexy, incidentally, is sex—a feat more remarkable in the context of contemporary fiction than it should be.)

Rooney's protagonists are usually as funny and intellectually agile as she is. They're also young enough to be deeply concerned, as an Andreas Ban is not, with how to fit themselves into the required shape, and with how much to blame themselves when they can't manage to do so. Frances notes near the beginning of *Conversations with Friends* that she "certainly never fantasized about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role," a quality she at times interprets as "a failure to

take an interest in my own life, which depressed me," while simultaneously feeling that "my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy." *Normal People*, as its title makes clear, puts the issue of fitting in at its heart, a reminder of how fundamental a problem of the human condition it is, and how many ethical risks it involves. Nearly everyone in the novel suffers and makes others suffer for conformity, and for at least one character it turns out to be lethal. At school—a place Marianne experiences as inherently Kafkaesque—Connell humiliates her, refusing to acknowledge her in public. After going to such lengths to maintain his position there, he finds himself, at Trinity College, Dublin, surrounded by the type of person who "just goes around comparing how much money their parents make. Like I'm being literal with that, I've seen that happen." Marianne attends Trinity, too, and dates Jamie, whose "dad was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis—not figuratively, one of the actual people involved."

Toward the end of the book, two characters are imagined as "like two little plants sharing the same plot of soil, growing around one another, contorting to make room, taking certain unlikely positions." It could be a romantic image—both of Rooney's novels are at least in one sense love stories—but

it's also sad, if not sinister, a representation of the hopeless distortion and confinement involved in living with others. Rooney is on record about her ambivalence as to the value of what she does, "writing entertainment, making decorative aesthetic objects at a time of historical crisis." And maybe there is some murmur of cognitive dissonance in being so thoroughly diverted by what's evidently the work of someone with a comprehensive and impassioned critique of the world as it is. That begs the question: Does it undermine what a novel has to say about its times if it's making them more bearable to live in? ■



SHALLOW CALLS TO SHALLOW

On Thomas Merton, fifty years after his death

By Garry Wills

Discussed in this essay:

On Thomas Merton, by Mary Gordon. Shambhala. 160 pages. \$22.95.

The *Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton's account of his conversion to Catholicism in 1938 and his subsequent entry into a Trappist monastery in Kentucky called Gethsemani, sold six hundred thousand copies when it was first published, in 1948, prompted a surprising number of men to become (or want to become) Trappist monks, and has since been translated into over twenty languages. The novelist Mary Gordon, in her new study of Merton, suggests it was not a book but a phenomenon. It may have been a phenomenon, but it was not atypical. It was in fact one of many signs of a feverish religiosity following World War II—a time of religious conversions, bulging seminaries, national revivals, and interfaith goodwill increasing among what Will Herberg called “the three great faiths” in his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955).

Polls in 1947 indicated that the most-respected leaders in America were ministers, priests, and rabbis. In 1954, “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and in 1956 “In God We Trust” became the national motto. Billy Graham became “pastor to the presidents,” and Monsignor Fulton Sheen became a television star. Religious conversions—whether to Protestantism (channeled by Graham) or to Catholicism (channeled by Sheen)—were everywhere. Even Dwight Eisenhower heard the call and was baptized by a Presbyterian minister in 1953, his first year as president. That same year, the Presi-

Garry Wills is a professor emeritus of history at Northwestern University. His most recent book is *What the Qur'an Meant*.

dential Prayer Breakfast (later the National Prayer Breakfast) was instituted. Around this time, the term Judeo-Christian became a common description of America's traditions.

In this period of heated piety, Catholics seemed the most successfully devout. Norman Podhoretz, with his interest in who was “making it,” said that Catholics were having their moment, and Lenny Bruce called Catholicism “the only *the church*.” In what was called “the Catholic Renaissance,” many Catholic intellectuals turned from modern commercialism toward eternity, or to the thirteenth century as a plausible substitute for eternity. They took up Gregorian chant, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the work of French Catholic literary stars—Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac, Pierre Teilhard du Chardin, Henri de Lubac, Georges Bernanos, Henri Ghéon, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Simone Weil. Many of these authors were translated into English for the publishing house of the Catholic Renaissance, Sheed and Ward.

Merton made Gethsemani a famous monastery by joining it, but another abbey, St. John's in Minnesota, was even more influential and had an earlier influx of vocations. In 1943, five years before *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published, Eugene McCarthy, the later senator and presidential candidate, entered St. John's Abbey to become a monk. To do this, he broke off his courting of the equally pious Abigail Quigly, who prayed that he would leave the abbey and come back to her. When

he did, they married and set up a farm as a kind of lay monastery of their own, called St. Anne's Farm (after the Virgin's mother). The novelist J. F. Powers was part of the St. John's Abbey orbit and a close friend of the McCarthys. They called themselves Detachers, for their detachment from the world.

St. John's Abbey, under the famous liturgical reformer Dom Virgil Michel, was in close communication with Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker community as well as Friendship House, an interracial apostolate in Toronto founded by the White Russian turned mendicant, Baroness de Hueck. The poet Robert Lowell and his wife Jean Stafford were followers of both women, and worked for Sheed and Ward. Lowell and J. F. Powers, inspired by Dorothy Day's pacifism, went to prison as conscientious objectors during World War II (they would later trade prison memories when they met at Yaddo). Day and de Hueck were inspirations, also, for Merton on his way to Gethsemani.

Mary Gordon says that she was too young to be impressed by *The Seven Storey Mountain* when it came out; but her father, she would find out later, was part of the Catholic Renaissance. It was because of him that she looked back and studied the period, and his influence can be felt not just in this book, but in much of her work. The child of an Irish-Catholic mother and a father who had converted to an ardent conservative Catholicism, Gordon was raised in a household as much caught up in that high tide of religiosity as Merton was when he wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Gordon, the author of more than a dozen novels, short-story collections, volumes of essays, and memoirs, has since written about the church—especially in early works, such as the novel *Final Payments* (1978)—often struggling to reconcile feminist beliefs with the persistent longing for those early days of orthodoxy. In her novels, Wilfrid Sheed wrote, “the Church is seen not as a good place or a bad place ... but as a multilayered poem or vision which dominates your life equally whether you believe it or not.”

Mary Gordon's father, David, converted to Catholicism in 1937, the year before Merton. He loved the Latin Mass (he had her memorize all of it before she was seven), revered St. Thomas More (patron of Catholic Renaissance laymen such as Mario Cuomo), admired Gregorian chant, and planned to publish a book on the

ton), both remembered time in England and France. Both were writers—David published articles in Catholic magazines and took money from his wife to launch a Catholic journal. This link through her father gives Gordon “the eerie feeling of connectedness between my life and Merton’s.” She continued to feel that way even though

(he had an earlier one). He said he went to Europe, though he never had a passport (he was born in Europe, though, as a Jewish child from Lithuania named Israel). He claimed he attended Harvard (he never graduated from high school). He suggested he wrote high literary criticism (he ran a porn magazine called *Hot Dog*).



right-wing Catholic poet Paul Claudel. After her father's death, Gordon found his copy of Merton's poems with a translation from the French stapled to the back cover. She took this to be her father's own translation.

Her father seemed to resemble Merton in many ways—both were adult converts to Catholicism, both graduated from an Ivy League school (Harvard for Gordon, Columbia for Mer-

ton). Both remembered time in England and France. Both were writers—David published articles in Catholic magazines and took money from his wife to launch a Catholic journal. This link through her father gives Gordon “the eerie feeling of connectedness between my life and Merton’s.” She continued to feel that way even though

the link frayed a little more each time she looked at it. To write *The Shadow Man* (1997), her still-adoring book about her father, who died in 1952 when she was only seven years old, she discovered that he had encased her childhood in a lovingly intricate shell of lies.

He was indeed part of the Catholic Renaissance, but part of its dark side. He was a church triumphalist who thought, with Father Leonard Feeney, that all non-Catholics go to hell. He admired Benito Mussolini, Francisco Franco, and Joe McCarthy. It might have softened his daughter's pain on confronting these discoveries if she had noted that many other Catholics shared one or more of these failings in the 1940s and 1950s. It

was not all just Gregorian chant and Thomas Aquinas in the church of Pius XII that David Gordon and Thomas Merton joined.

Her devotion to him, nevertheless, remained unshaken. In fact, she was made acutely uncomfortable that he was not buried in congenial company, but with people who had not appreciated him. So she went through the complicated process of exhuming his body and having it reburied in consecrated Catholic ground, with a ceremony in proper ecclesiastical Latin. More to the point, she continued to see a link between her father and Merton. Only this can explain the unusual shape of her new book, which examines Merton's seemingly contradictory identities as a writer and a monk through four chapters.

The nature of Gordon's affection for Merton is common among his devotees, who see something sympathetic in his struggle to find God, and admire the way he went on to combine the spiritual asceticism of monastic life with a more temporal, progressive concern for the moral dilemmas of the world. Gordon is deeply invested in her imagined tie to Merton, living with him so intently that she says when she saw, getting out of the bathtub, a picture of him on one of his books, she "quickly covered [herself] with a towel." And when she reads a late passage in the journals, she bursts out, "'Oh, Tom, don't you know you have only days to live?' I want to reach into the pages and pull him back into life."

In her book, she leaves aside Merton's poems (not very good, she thinks) and his study of Eastern religions, which broke him out of the triumphal church of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. She concentrates instead on what she considers Merton's three most important writings—the pivotal *Seven Storey Mountain*, of course (despite its triumphalism), the seven volumes of his journals, and his posthumously published novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, one of five he had written before becoming a monk, and the only one he did not destroy. He preserved it, and was preparing it for publication when he died.

Though this early autobiographical novel is not much more than third-rate Joyce, fourth-rate Eliot, and some out-of-date Surrealism, Gordon is drawn to the way in which the thinly disguised Merton as protagonist lived the very things David Gordon claimed to have lived—college, England, France. The same sequence is repeated by Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain* without the disguise of fiction. But that tale of a worldly young Merton finding God mutes a key event, the reason for his



departure from Cambridge University before he finished his course of studies. Merton's father died just before Merton entered Cambridge, and the guardian who supplied his funds yanked him home when it became known that he had impregnated a local Cambridge girl. Gordon regrets that Merton showed no later interest in the girl and his baby (though the reason for that may lie in his novel's possible slight reference to the event, of which Gordon does not take note: "I several times went out with a girl who was known all over Cambridge as the 'Freshman's delight'").

An early fan and promoter of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was Evelyn Waugh. Waugh's favor made his British publisher ask Waugh to be an additional cutter and corrector of the book (Robert Giroux had edited the American edition thoroughly), which Waugh retitled *Elected Silence* for the English market. The best-known aspect of Gethsemani was the fact that Cistercians of the Strict Observance (as the Trappists are formally named) maintain

a prayerful silence with one another. Waugh, who admired this dedication to silence, was critical later on when he saw how publicly voluble Merton became with his flood of books. In his twenty-seven years at Gethsemani, he often published two or three books a year, while also writing articles, public statements, an expansive journal, ancillary diaries, and fifteen thousand letters (many to celebrities). In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton said that his writing was just doing the Lord's work, like that of his brother monks milking cows or making cheese. When Waugh said that contemplative orders should stick to making cheese and liqueurs, Merton responded by telling Waugh to say the rosary every day (especially if he did not like doing it). Their warm mutual admiration coolly evanesced.

After Merton published *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and people started showing up at his abbey as postulants to become monks or as "seculars" making weekend retreats, Merton's books began to earn real money for Gethsemani, funds needed to handle the flood of applicants and visitors he had inspired. His output now had to match this influx. His otherworldly superiors, meanwhile, suddenly had a crass stake in his popularity—it brought the abbey fame, recruits, and money. In time he would begin to resent this, saying the publicity made him feel "cheap": "I am sickened . . . by being treated as an article for sale, as a commodity."

He became depressed and sour about what was happening to the abbey. It was staging itself, in a kind of "liturgical vaudeville," which heightened the flow of people he was bringing in—"all those guys, some solid, mostly half-wits I think, who are nevertheless good, well-meaning people and honest in their way, and many of whom are here on account of me."

The abbey tried to make Merton more than an ornament of its establishment, giving him responsible roles such as the novice master. But he preferred to devote himself to his writing, and he let his fellow

monks know in an open letter that he would not serve as the abbot, should that office come open, not wanting to spend the rest of his life “arguing about trifles with 125 confused and anxiety-ridden monks.” The brothers could not publicly express discontent with that insult. He was their source of the world’s respect.

As he distanced himself from the monks, he was amassing an adoring fan club, corresponding feverishly with peace and civil-rights activists who looked to him for moral confirmation of their cause. Other notables in the Catholic Renaissance were bouncing back from the Middle Ages, giving up detachment for engagement, moving from Pius XII to John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Eugene and Abigail McCarthy left St. Anne’s Farm and opposed the Vietnam War. Robert Lowell gave up work for Sheed and Ward and would in time organize resistance to Lyndon Johnson. Jerry Brown left the seminary and became the governor of California, carrying his Teilhard with him. But these relicts of the Catholic Renaissance liked the fact that Merton was famously still detached, still in a silent monastery; it gave his rush of new writings about civil rights and peace a moral heft they needed.

Merton wanted to be with these former Catholic Renaissance figures—but he was wedged too far back in the monastic Middle Ages to slip out easily. Rather than leaving the holy for the profane, he would try to blend the two. He found ways to get out of the abbey for conferences, health treatments, meetings with editors and agents. His ecstatic reaction in 1964 at returning to New York, whose tawdry allure was scorned in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was that of a man drearily imprisoned and desperate to be free.

Merton’s superiors tried to restrain him, mainly by censoring his writings. This reached a crisis in 1962, although Gordon does not explore this. From Rome, the abbot general of the Cistercian order, Dom Gabriel Sortais, ordered Merton to stop writing about the nuclear threat. Merton wrote to his circle of outside admirers that Cistercians

thought his position “a hateful distraction, withdrawing one’s mind from Baby Jesus in the Crib. Strange to say, no one seems concerned at the fact that the crib is directly under the bomb.” He had access to mimeograph machines, so he circulated his own version of samizdat, smuggled past monastic guards, supplying his allies with new arguments they could quote among themselves or in their own writing.

Despite opposition from a hostile abbot, Merton was surprisingly successful at getting the visitors and books and music he wanted to keep him up with “the movement.” He was reading James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X, and listening to the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Joan Baez. He worked through two contacts to get a visit from Baez, and they commiserated with Dylan in a stressful time for the singer.

He was able to get such special treatment simply because he threatened to leave the Cistercians for a more contemplative life in stricter monasteries. In 1965, to keep him on the vast grounds of the abbey, the abbot approved a state of virtual secession within the monastery. Merton could live in his own hermitage, distant from the main house, where he asked that other monks not visit him. He said that he wanted more solitude, but he told the truth in his journal, that he wanted “all the liberty and leeway I have in the hermitage.” It gave admiring outsiders easier access to him and let him slip off the grounds to make unmonitored phone calls to them. Gregory Zilboorg, the first psychoanalyst who treated him, said, “You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying HERMIT.”

One year into life at his own hermitage, he found the place useful in an unanticipated way. In 1966, he had back surgery in a Louisville hospital, where he fell in love with a young student nurse. Though many people think he referred to her only as “M,” to protect her privacy, he wrote of her in his journal as Margie. (It was the editor of the relevant journal volume who first

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used "M.") Merton had been visiting another psychiatrist, James Wygal, for his depression. The doctor, though he did not approve of the tryst, lent them (not for the last time) his office for their meeting. Later Merton wrote: "I keep remembering her body, her nakedness, the day at Wygal's, and it haunts me." In his poems to her, he would write of their "worshiping hands" and how "I cling to the round hull/Of your hips." She was twenty-five; he was fifty-one.

He used trips to the airport for meeting literary friends as excuses for seeing her. She also met him in a woods by the abbey, bringing a picnic basket and a bottle of sauterne, where, he wrote, "[we] drank our wine and read poems and talked of ourselves and mostly made love and love and love." When an overheard phone call to her was reported to his abbot, that official tried to break off the affair. Though the abbot did not want to lose Merton from Gethsemani, keeping him there while the affair continued would risk a scandal. Merton thought Abbot James Fox was inhuman and "jealous of me." He was ordered by the abbot to make a complete break. The abbot asked for Margie's name, to write her himself, explaining why there would be no more phone calls, but Merton refused.

When Baez and the peace activist Ira Sandperl visited Merton's hermitage, and heard how he missed Margie, who had gone back to her home in Cincinnati after finishing her training in the Louisville hospital,

Joan was ready to drive ninety miles an hour through the rain to Cincinnati so I could see M when she got off at the hospital (11:30 PM). So went to Bardstown and called M. But then they could not get their reservations changed to a convenient time. Just as well I did not go!

Other monks sensed that something was wrong with Merton, but he dismissed them as "Boy Scouts." When, in the fifth month of the affair, Abbot Fox realized that Merton was not keeping his verbal promises, Merton offered him a written pledge to observe solitude for the rest of his

life. Merton was surprisingly jauntily about this in his journal:

Dom James signed it with me, content that he now had me in the bank as an asset that would not go out and lose itself in some crap game of love (is he sure—? The awful crap game of love!).

But as soon as he took a trip to the University of Louisville library, he found a phone booth from which to call Margie, and wrote her a poem about the call.

He justified breaking his pledge out of concern for her, suggesting that a complete end to their relationship "would be very bad for her." But ultimately what he cared most about was the audience he had created for his spiritual leadership:

There are too many people in the world who rely on the fact that I am serious about deepening an inner dimension of experience that they desire and that is closed to them. And it is not closed to me. This is a gift that has been given me not for myself but for everyone, even including Margie. I cannot let it be squandered and dissipated foolishly. It would be criminal to do so. In the end I would ruin her along with myself.

Mary Gordon does not seem to feel the essential smugness of this pose. Merton's commitment to Margie had always been hedged about with his prestige as a monk. "I don't really want married life anyway; I want the life I have vowed." Gordon is right to treat the six-month obsession with "M" as trivial in itself. This was never Shakespeare's "marriage of true minds," as exemplified by Abelard and Héloïse. Here deep did not call to deep, but shallow to shallow.

Yet the web of lies that Gordon stipulates for Merton in love is not confined to that episode. It is at one with a pattern built into his "apostolate" as the with-it monk. He pretended to love the monastic community he thought full of "half-wits," whom he wanted nothing more to do with, as part of the quest for a "greater solitude" he used to increase his audience of fans and the famous. He wanted the best of both worlds, as a holy preacher and a covert sinner. ■

DOWN AND OUT IN THE PELOPONNESUS

Christos Ikonomou's modern tragedies

By Francine Prose

Discussed in this essay:

Good Will Come from the Sea, by Christos Ikonomou. Translated from the Greek by Karen Emmerich. Archipelago. 252 pages. \$18.

Something Will Happen, You'll See, by Christos Ikonomou. Translated from the Greek by Karen Emmerich. Archipelago. 276 pages. \$18.



Christos Ikonomou's powerful short stories chronicle the lives—and inner lives—of struggling, working-class Greeks: unemployed, desperately poor, men and women, young and old, the victims of Greece's decadelong economic crisis and of failed austerity measures, the consequences of massive government debt and a long, catastrophic

Francine Prose is the author, most recently, of *Mister Monkey* (Harper). She is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine.

recession. The two collections—*Something Will Happen, You'll See* and *Good Will Come from the Sea*—which have been published here in superb translations by Karen Emmerich, have, as their titles, predictions and promises that don't come true—certainly not in the hopeful ways they might seem to suggest.

Set in the port city of Piraeus, not far from Athens, many of the stories in *Something Will Happen* were written before the crisis of 2008. But life

in Ikonomou's Piraeus is already grim enough. A couple breaks up over the contents of a piggy bank. A father who lost his job when the local factory shut down scrambles for the money to feed his son and buy him a chocolate Easter egg—a quest that ends in a painful encounter with Jesus' crown of thorns.

In "The Things They Carried," five men warm themselves around a fire outside the social security office on a bitterly cold January night so they can be the first on line to consult the doctors in the morning. The litany of what they bring with them echoes Tim O'Brien's story about soldiers in Vietnam, though what these beleaguered Greeks carry has more to do with poverty, memory, and loss than with the revelatory contents of an American soldier's pack. "Deep inside," Ikonomou writes, "each carried fear and stress and worry about illness and time, which came each day like a conscientious gardener to trim off a bit of their lives."

The stories in *Good Will Come from the Sea* take place on an unnamed island to which a group of mainland Greeks have migrated, drawn by the promise of a fresh start and a marginally better life. Instead they find a society that has sunk lower than the one they left behind. In Athens, a character tells us, it's easier—there are more people, you can do what you want. But everyone on the island knows everyone and hears everything, and criminals are in charge. Thugs, thieves, and killers have moved into the vacuum left by the lack of a functioning government.

The newcomers are hated by the locals, who call them "foreigners" and "Athenians," regardless of whether they come from Athens. In turn, the recent arrivals refer to the locals as "rats." Hardly noticed by tourists struggling with restaurant

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE

THE WORLD WAR II DIARY OF
GEORGE MCGOVERN

With an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE



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MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE
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BASIC TRAINING TO THE END OF
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INTRODUCTION BY
ANDREW J. BACEVICH
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two groups are locked in combat. When a baptismal font disappears from a church, the “rats” accuse the “Athenians” of stealing it:

The hell we did, we said. What the fuck would we do with a font? Use it as a kiddie pool or something? No, they said, you sold it for copper. Ten euros per kilo, a hundred-kilo font, that's a clean thousand in your pockets. Well, we said, if we're counting to a thousand, your wives and daughters have probably sucked a thousand dicks this year, you can start there.

Idealists don't fare well in this world. In the opening story, “I'll Swallow Your Dreams,” an optimist named Tasos believes it might be possible to improve life on the island:

Good will come from the sea, he said. I don't know why that had stuck in his head, but he said it all the time. And always in the same way, kind of singing, and if you asked, he'd tell you it was a line from a song.

Everyone knows better than to complain about the homegrown mafiosi who ship the island's agricultural produce to Athens and sell the islanders (at a huge markup) Dutch tomatoes, Egyptian potatoes, grouper from Senegal, and “navel oranges, origin South Africa, warning, rind unsuitable for human consumption, preserved with imazalil and thiabendazole ... drenched in insecticides.” The price of protest is too high. “Who in their right mind would speak up?... Henchmen, guys packing heat, a whole parade of Corleones. You talk, you're done. You raise your head, they blow it off.”

Only Tasos keeps talking, until his protests anger Xellinakis, the mobster who controls the import business, and whose thugs find creative ways to silence Tasos: “They tied him to the hood of his truck and ran him through the car wash. Soap, brushes, industrial dryers, the whole works. He was in the hospital for a week, broken teeth, his body flayed by the brushes and chemicals.”

Tasos refuses to back down, urges his neighbors to organize and threatens to make the criminals repay what they've stolen:

From now on you'll put ten percent of your profits every year toward building roads, sidewalks, nursery schools.... It's time for you to do something for the island. And since you won't do it on your own, we'll have to force you....

That's the sort of stuff he said, the same bullshit you read online by the average blogger in need of a good lay.

Tensions escalate until a confrontation occurs outside a cave, known as the Refuge, where Tasos and his community are celebrating Easter. The choice of the cave—as a party space and killing ground—can't be accidental. The author, his characters, and presumably his readers are aware of the role that caves served as portals to the underworld in Greek mythology and literature. And that's how the Refuge functions for poor Tasos:

He stood there at the mouth of the cave—a little drop of a man before all that black. He stood and looked at us, his eyes as red as can be, and his face red too, his scars seemed to have swollen and his whole face looked like a mask that someone held up to the fire until it slowly started to melt. He pulled the gun from his pocket and said something that none of us heard, then disappeared into the cave at a run.

Tasos's wife and friends sit outside around a campfire, waiting for him to reappear, knowing he won't. They are frightened, first of

things coming alive in the dark.... And then another fear grips you, a bigger one, because you realize how terrifying it is, how terrifying that you've begun to react not like a person but like something else.... And what scares you most of all is that you don't know what that other thing is that you've started to become—what will come next, what does a person become when he stops being a person, what is there on the other side of human?

Then you think how, in the end, this is what that poor bastard Tasos was trying to do. He may not have known it, but he was struggling to stay human, to keep on being a person. Not a good person, or a proper person, or a better person, just a person—a person, plain and simple.

This question—how does one maintain one’s humanity in a destroyed country?—is at the heart of many of these stories. It runs beneath the descriptions of poverty, unemployment, of taking or not taking political action, of dreams nurtured or shattered. In an interview in *The Nassau Literary Review* in 2015, Ikonomou spoke of his work as both documenting and transcending the hardships of life in modern Greece to get at something universal, to get under the skin of his characters and reveal what they share with people everywhere:

Literature is not some kind of political manifestation. Yes, of course as a writer you may have whatever ideology or political principles, or you may be left, right, or whatever, but here these people have their own personalities.... They are saying and they are doing a lot of things that I would not say or do myself, but that’s ... why I am writing literature. I’m trying to be someone else.

Many of his characters have a very clear, tough-minded sense of what has gone wrong with their country, but because these characters are so well drawn and fully realized, their political analysis feels uniquely theirs, not that of the author speaking through them. In “Kites in July,” a young man, Stavros, disagrees about recent history with his girlfriend’s rich Greek-German (“more German than German”) uncle. According to Uncle Raphael:

Over the past few years, Greece had committed the perfect crime. Actual perpetrators: politicians. Moral perpetrators: voters. Motive: to buy people’s conscience. Weapon: money—foreign money, black market money, easy money. Victim: the nation.

That was his theory in a nutshell. And as much as Stavros felt like giving him a piece of his mind in return, he always held his tongue.

Do us a favor and go fuck yourself, Uncle Raphael, he wanted to say. Everyone’s always pointing fingers at this crime or that, but the Germans sure are ones to speak. And drop that line about Europe already. What Europe? Europe only existed on maps and in books.... What do I have to do with a Dane, a Swede, a Czech? And what

exactly was our crime? The fact that we wanted a shingle or two over our heads, wanted to buy a car?

Ikonomou gives great dignity and intelligence to his characters, who are capable of quick humor, of complex philosophical inquiry, moral speculation, and metaphysical rumination. They want myths, and like us they want to be told stories. The father searching for his lost son in “Good Will Come from the Sea”—the son he urged to go work for a sociopathic shipowner—passes landmarks with fairy-tale names (Dragon Cave, Beast’s Hole, Mute’s Spring, Seven Threshing Floors, Murderer’s Gorge, the Church of the Butchered Virgin) and longs for the resolution that ends even the most frightening fairy tales.

“Fairy tales always end well,” he thinks aloud to himself. “Right? Right. They lived well and we live even better. Of course. That’s how the story goes.”

Ikonomou’s heroes are often reduced to silence; they can’t say what needs to be said. In “Placard and Broomstick,” a man attempting to make a sign protesting the workplace death of his friend winds up appearing at the site with a blank placard, because what he wants to say is too monumental and bewildering to fit onto a piece of cardboard:

He wanted to write something that would express unspeakable rage and hatred and love and despair all at once. Or maybe it should be some plain, dry slogan, the kind of thing a political party might say about workplace fatalities, about people who die on the job. Or maybe something like the things they write on the gravestones of people who die in vain, or too young. Something about god and the soul and angels and the afterlife.

Stavros and Artemis, the lovers in “Kites in July,” have a vision not unlike Tasos’s: they plan to build an eco-friendly hotel and use the profits to help the island.

The couple borrows money from Artemis’s Uncle Raphael and renovates a shack they plan to open as a waterfront *ouzerie* called Good Will

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Come from the Sea. Their friends warn them that it's madness to undercut what the gangsters are charging in their cafés. ("It's like me renting a double room for twenty euros a night when everyone else in my category charges a hundred. That's not how things work. There's a system. There are cartels.") But the couple clings to their dream.

By now the reader already knows that the couple's little world has ended before it began. The *ouzerie* has been torched by the same gangsters who drove Tasos into the cave at the collection's start. "Those rats had done a fine job. Real professionals. It was all ash now, nothing was left standing."

Throughout, Ikonomou's style veers between flights of incantatory lyricism and volleys of funny lines and tough street talk. Again one wants to praise Karen Emmerich's translation: How does one recognize and render the Greek words for "scratch-offs and quick picks"? Sentences go on for pages as characters mourn lost loves and debate the virtues of selflessness and the existence of evil.

In "Something Will Happen, You'll See," a woman whose home is about to be seized by the bank watches TV and thinks about her life in a passage that precisely renders the types of thought processes that make Ikonomou's work—despite the sad stories it tells—so energizing and moving:

There was a documentary on about American Indians but Niki just stared out the balcony door at the

glow from the floodlights over at the electric plant. That afternoon a bunch of workers had climbed up on the chimney and hung a banner and shouted slogans. She watched the beams from the floodlights slicing the darkness like enormous swords and wondered how an artist would paint this scene—if there were still artists left in the world who painted scenes like that: a woman sitting in the dark with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, her face lit by the dim blue light of the television. Wouldn't be much of a painting. Maybe if she had a gun in her hand, or a vibrator. Coffee and cigarettes wouldn't cut it. People don't get excited any more about old-fashioned things. Who cares about the finances and family problems of the petit bourgeoisie? Très banal.

The rhapsodic lyricism and dry gallows humor, the speed and nimbleness of the tonal shifts, drew me in to these books. The sympathy of Ikonomou's characterization—the humanity he captures on the page—made me keep reading. These stories show the challenges of ordinary life—falling in love, working or not working, living in families, dying—in a destroyed economy. It's one thing to read a newspaper item about how the Greek austerity measures cut back basic services, but it's a different thing entirely to find ourselves, thanks to Ikonomou, in a scruffy neighborhood, where the streetlights have gone out and a scrawny young guy named Mao, whose sister has been gang-raped, sits outside in the pitch dark, accompanied only by his cat, keeping watch over his blacked-out streets. ■

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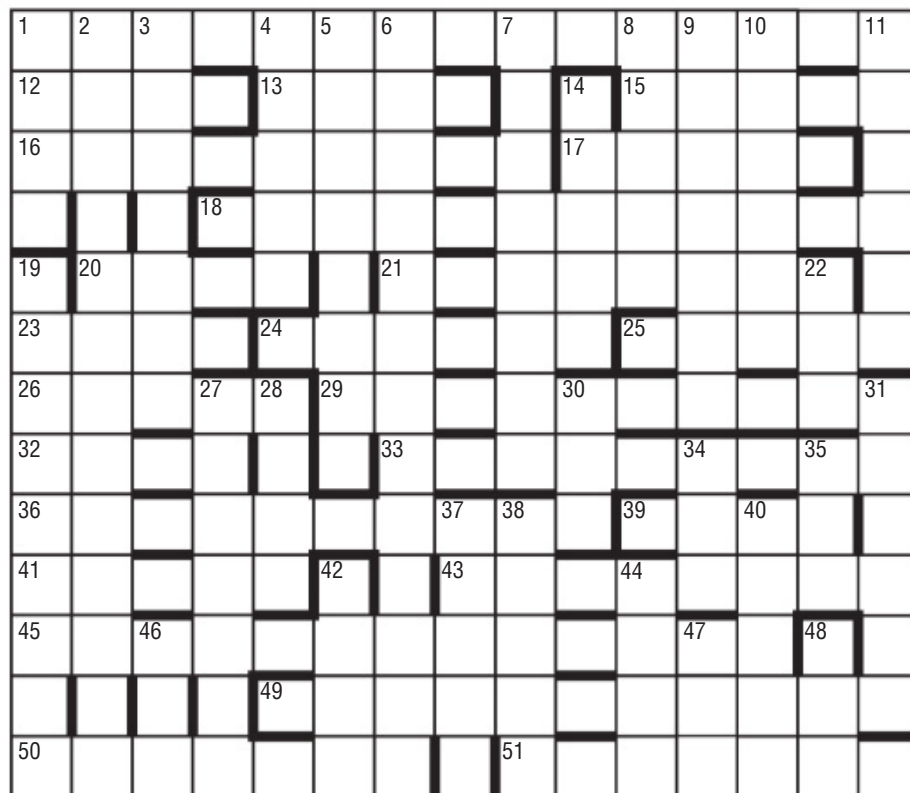
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MYSTERY

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

Recent news has included a mystery that is referred to in several ways, one of which is 1A. Since no one likes an unsolved mystery, this puzzle offers nine possible—and equally likely—solutions.

Clued answers include five proper nouns. 3D is uncommon. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 61.



ACROSS

1. See instructions (6,6,3)
12. Love the first person not seen in Dior perfume (4)
13. Singer-songwriter to a degree gets a pass driving in New York City (4)
15. You'll shun me—I'll put you off right back! (5)
16. Copying a revised outline that covers article and manuscript's heading (9)
17. Departs but, not having left, they hang around the house (5)
18. See instructions (4,8)
20. River from a state—take notice (4)
21. See instructions (8)
23. See instructions (4)
24. In a new series, a rerun is common (6)
25. Portion, first to last, found in hoppers (5)
26. See instructions (5) (with 31D)
29. Good Humor ordered by a militia (10)
32. Quantity of crack I located? (4)
33. See instructions (5,4)
36. Questionable N.Y. material concerned with nutrition (10)
39. As they say in Rome, "Where is the bird?" (4)
41. Go out, see what a stripper does backwards (5)
43. Jazzy organist is hot (8)
45. See instructions (6,7)
49. See instructions (5,6)
50. NYC sign: CHARACTERS WORKING TOGETHER! (7)
51. Pass out, in the past, from green cheese (7)
2. See instructions (6,7)
3. Packet of coins, or rising field between two universities (7)
4. Don't start job with doctors (see #44) (5)
5. Latina, on becoming a citizen (8)
6. See instructions (4,9)
7. Not exactly normal around gold records once (8)
8. Horny character in *The Waste Land* (5)
9. Volkswagen's starter is being installed in actual new version; ... (7)
10. ... can need, perhaps, two jacks (6)
11. *Times* essay cut, says, in strikes (6)
14. Nepenthe doesn't need the funny-looking tubes (5)
19. Fools someone sailing with less than full value (9)
22. Clear as the Seine? (3)
27. Witty company doctor (7)
28. Quickly, look up a place in a castle (4)
30. Lady reporter ably following her lead (3)
31. See instructions (6) (see 26A)
34. Corruption in brothels (3)
35. Study how to say you didn't do it? No, yes? (3)
37. Cadre, after maneuvers, bowed (5)
38. Famous TV series about second-level robots (5)
40. Lisi, the Italian name, in almost viral surroundings (5)
42. An up-and-down foodstuff (4)
44. Crack shot (4)
46. Good person from 42D, after making AAU (3)
47. Facelessly kids the aspirations of the Hebrews! (3)
48. Upset, go down to get a pointer, maybe (3)

DOWN

1. Pound is one place one enters timidly, initially (4)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Mystery," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by April 12. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the June issue. The winner of the February puzzle, "Crazy Quilt," is William Spont, Santa Monica, Calif.



FINDINGS

Carp were dying of herpes in Babylon. *Peste des petits ruminants* struck a lamb-fattening unit in Israel. Salmonellosis outbreaks were blamed on Crisp & Delicious chicken nuggets in Canada, on pet hedgehogs in the United States, and on Spanish powdered milk in France. The Namibian government warned of diarrheal shellfish poisoning, and the New Zealand government warned of paralytic shellfish poisoning. Zaire Ebola virus was diagnosed in greater long-fingered bats in Liberia. A Wyoming house cat was diagnosed with plague. Anthrax was suspected in the death of an elephant calf in India and in the deaths of at least forty-five hippos in Malawi. Humans and cattle in the Mayotte archipelago came down with Rift Valley fever, and Brazilian pigs contracted Seneca Valley virus. Japanese officials began slaughtering 6,600 hogs in Toyota City in an attempt to contain classical swine fever, and Denmark planned to fence its border with Germany to guard against boars infected with African swine fever. Karnatakan monkeys were found dead from Kyasanur Forest disease, and rope squirrels were suspected of spreading monkeypox in the Central African Republic. A late potato blight struck Nigeria's Plateau State, Stewart's wilt was afflicting Slovenian corn, Xylella wilt was found in French lavender in a Portuguese zoo, and a mystery bacterium was wilting black pepper on South Indian plantations. An MRSA outbreak originated at a massage parlor in Kuala Lumpur. Keralan sanitation workers were beset with scrub typhus, and murine typhus had infiltrated Los Angeles City Hall.

British military personnel who served in Afghanistan's Helmand Province were found to have come down with Q fever. Fake news during the 2016 presi-

dential election was shared by 18.1 percent of Republican Facebook users and 3.5 percent of Democratic Facebook users, and 15 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats feel it would be best if most members of the other party "just died." Republicans live longer than Democrats. In religious countries, people buried in piously decorated graves tend to have lived longer. When ancient Romans were wealthier, their health was poorer. The surrogate-born female children of gay male couples are particularly well-adjusted. New research described the parenting behaviors of the male smooth guardian frog. A mate was found for Romeo, who has lived alone in a Bolivian aquarium for ten years and was thought to be the last of the Sehuencas water frogs. A small snake found in the stomach of a larger snake in Chiapas in 1976 was determined to be a new species that has never been found outside the snake that ate it.

Waves everywhere are getting stronger. A Scottish lab created a rogue wave. Antarctica is losing six times more ice annually than it was forty years ago, and Greenland was found to be melting four times as fast as it was in 2003. Tens of thousands of starving guillemots were washing up in the Netherlands. Scientists warned that humans should not create octopus farms. British fish wholesalers are selling the wrong sharks. A fermented beluga whale flipper was blamed for the death of a man in Nome, Alaska. Speakers of Farsi and Lao are unusually precise at describing taste, whereas speakers of Umpila outperformed all other languages' speakers in their identification of smell. People have better working memory if, in their native language, meanings remain, until the end of the sentence, unclear. ■

Midsummer Night's Dream, enamel on canvas, by Inka Essenhigh. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York City

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